

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: GO-GO LIVE: WASHINGTON, D.C.'S  
CULTURAL INFORMATION NETWORK,  
DRUMMING THE NEWS, KNITTING  
COMMUNITIES AND GUARDING A BLACK  
PUBLIC SPHERE

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Through the frame of Habermas's theory of the public sphere, this study argues that go-go, Washington, D.C.'s funk-based live music genre, functions as a unique public sphere in the majority-black United States capital city also known as the "Chocolate City." Go-go is a powerful counter-discourse to hip-hop, another urban culture with origins in the 1970s post-industrial American landscape. Both hip-hop and go-go originally functioned as a news and cultural medium for geographically-specific African American communities, or what rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy described as a "black CNN." While hip-hop moved into the global mainstream of popular culture, the go-go community guarded the borders of its sphere from encroachment, commercialization, and cooptation from political, cultural, and economic forces. Live concerts employ centuries-old rituals, scripts, and codes in dance, music and clothing to deliver the news in a call-and-response with African-derived traditions. The study of go-go provides insights useful to both the music and news media industries under assault by the decentralization and democratization of production and fragmentation of audiences. This study

demonstrates how through a network of roving independent entrepreneurs and storefront businesses, go-go has protected the sanctity of this sphere and continues to build community across several decades and a variety of media platforms. This study combines ethnography, life history research, ethnomusicology, and cultural geography to “read” the news go-go tells, stories, communities and people overlooked or misunderstood by corporate news media.

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NETWORK, DRUMMING THE NEWS, KNITTING COMMUNITIES AND  
GUARDING A BLACK PUBLIC SPHERE

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor Philosophy  
2007

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## Preface

### GO-GO LIVES



Illustration 1. Uncle Sam nudges the red-carpet crowd toward the door for Constitution Hall at the 2006 WKYS Go-Go Awards in 2006. All photos by the author except when noted.

A who's who of politicians, musicians, activists, and entrepreneurs took their bows on the red carpet set up outside Washington, D.C.'s Daughters of the American Revolution's Constitution Hall for the First Annual WKYS Go-Go Awards in 2006. They were there to honor the stars of go-go—a funk-based music style born in Washington, D.C. around 1976. Go-go is a vernacular style of music known for its distinctive “Beat”: pulsing bass drum, timbales, cowbells, and roto-toms layered with synthesizers and a horn section. But as the crowd sailing by the red carpet could attest, in the District of Columbia, go-go is also a community—and big business.

Former Mayor Marion Barry held court in a powder-blue velour suit and flanked by his protégé, D.C. city councilman Kwame Brown. Al-Malik Farrakhan of the anti-violence group Cease Fire, Don't Smoke the Brothers stopped by. Adrian Fenty, Washington's 35-year old Mayor-elect crossed the carpet, stopping at the assorted microphones and video cameras to wax nostalgic about watching the go-go band Rare Essence as a kid, later exulting to the cheering crowd inside that "the next Mayor of DC is a go-go fan!" Floating by the red carpet on this November night were Familiar Faces such as Donnell Floyd, assembled with his band mates in GQ tailored suits. There were 1980s stars like Big Tony from Trouble Funk, the rapper DC Scorpio, and Sugar Bear from EU. Vusi Mchunu, who would later take the Best Designer prize, swaggered across the carpet in black Gucci wraparound shades. Eddie Van, and Ty Johnson, who pioneered Washington's urban clothing industry in the early 1980s, took a triumphant stroll across the carpet, salt and pepper cornrows tucked under a brown "Madness" cap. Club U proprietor Warren C. Williams Jr.'s nightclub had been shuttered by an early-morning murder nearly two years earlier, but still made it out to collect "Best Venue" prize.

The evening's master of ceremonies, go-go bandleader, actor with HBO's "The Wire," and radio personality Ghenghis, posed on the red carpet, moments before dramatically announcing his defection from a rival urban radio station to join the staff of the evening's sponsor, WKYS.

WKYS was, as the bold black letters on one T-shirt reminded everyone, "The People's Station." Unlike its top rival, which is owned by the corporate titan CBS, this is a local company that grew from a single Washington AM station in 1981 to the

largest black radio chain in the United States. Although Radio One founder Cathy Hughes built her suburban Washington-based media empire by buying local stations and converting them to the hip-hop/urban radio format, she still had special place in her heart for go-go. Hughes voiced her aspirations for go-go to an interviewer for a 1991 documentary:

The way go-go is treated by the music industry is how black folks have been treated by the power structure. It's like you're a bastard child, we don't want you, you're not good enough to be part of it. How dare them say that! So over the next 10, 15, or 20 years, I would like to see go-go reach its rightful position of prominence." (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001, p.180)

But business was business. Radio One turned its back on go-go when it made financial sense. In the 1980s, an AM program devoted to go-go was cancelled. The amount of time given to go-go was reduced to an allotted time slot each evening, and go-go songs were rarely if ever put on regular rotation. "The reality is that the forces driving the programming at commercial radio stations (national charts reign supreme) are antithetical to go-go's very local appeal" (Lornell & Stephenson 2001, p. 192).

By 2006, go-go's local appeal was becoming increasingly valuable. Hip-hop had crossed over and was being played on "mainstream" radio stations around the country, diminishing Radio One's market advantage. Radical changes were sweeping all media industries due to new technologies such as Satellite radio and I-Pods, fragmenting audiences into a million pieces. Like much of the mainstream entertainment and news media industries, Radio One was in trouble. The second quarter profits in 2006 were down 59 percent (Ahrens, 2006). The third quarter profits were down 30 percent (O'Hara, 2006).

By staging the Go-Go Awards, the company could tap into Washington's vibrant local market. Tickets to the Go-Go Awards were not for sale. Instead the whole city tuned in to WKYS to try to win free tickets to the awards show so that they could see their favorite bands perform. Many go-go activists were bitter about go-go's treatment by the local radio industry. Although go-go has a place on local radio, it is often crowded by national hip-hop acts that do little to reflect the reality of life in Washington, D.C. Some members of the go-go community felt mildly exploited by what was in effect a publicity stunt. Still, politicians, businessmen, musicians could all agree on one thing: It's good to do the "right thing"—celebrating and honoring black culture. It is also really important for everyone to get paid.

#### Go-Go Lives

By most measures the Go-Go Awards should not have been possible in 2006—thirty years after a guitar player named Chuck Brown created a sound for the city. Go-go should have been co-opted and commercialized like its Bronx-born cousin, hip-hop. It should have gone global like its other cousin reggae. It should have fizzled out like other new music genres that have come and gone with little notice. It should have buckled under the political pressure from local government officials, worried about the violence around club venues, who wanted it to go away. Yet here it is, defying Rogers (1995) laws of diffusion many years past what should have been the "tipping point." Under the "mainstream" radar, go-go lives as a multimillion dollar industry filling up clubs seven days a week and supporting a massive local infrastructure of mom & pop stores, graphic artists, promoters, and clothing designers.

The most straightforward reasons for go-go longevity can ultimately be found in the economic structures that underpin it in Washington's black community. However, a more complicated, ambiguous and honest reason for its longevity is rooted in a web of history, geography, culture, and politics. It begins with the evolution of the art form—its roots in West African culture, which I discuss in Chapter 3, "Call & Response." The answers can be found in the geopolitical and cultural history of the District of Columbia, also known as the Chocolate City—a politically disenfranchised colony with a majority-black population, which I explore in Chapter 4, "Club U." The answers can be found in the thousands of live recordings that are archived by traders like "Go-Go Nico, described in Ch. 5, "Life History."

As I show in Chapter 7, "Liveness" go-go has a similar structure to communication systems in parts of rural Uganda, where government officials use "folk media," "oramedia" or the "talking" drum to send messages about HIV and other important information, or in Nigeria, where juju musicians encoded their recordings with subversive messages and news about current events, or hip-hop, which Chuck D noted, used to be the "black CNN."

In Chapter 6, "1986," I analyze a seminal Rare Essence go-go recording to see what news was delivered on a single night with the benefit of 20 years of hindsight. Ultimately, this will show that the Uncle Sam pictured below at the 2006 Go-Go Awards is not at all out of place. This recording is just one of thousands of go-go recordings that James Scott (1990) described as "hidden transcripts," which can be vehicles for society to challenge prevailing discourses and better understand itself.

Go-go is a live, discursive communication practice and black public sphere that tells the news of alternate realities, lives, and histories in the nation's capital.

## Dedication

To my parents, Serena Hopkinson and Terrence Hopkinson. Thank you for giving me just the right perspective.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who shared this journey with me, starting with my husband Rudy McGann and my children, Maverick and Maven. My colleagues at the Washington Post Style section, especially Lynn Medford, Deb Heard, Marcia Davis and Gene Robinson, and photographer Marvin Joseph who all shared my enthusiasm for go-go. The whole go-go community for continuing to delight and amaze me, especially Richard O'Connor who first let "The Enemy" in, also: Nico Hobson, Kato Hammond, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Delece Smith-Barrow, Kadidia Thiero, INI Band, Big G, Jay Pooh, Ronald "Mo" Moten, Ken and Sam Moore. DJ Renegade for the philosophical and editing help. Thank you, Chris Callahan, who recruited me back to Maryland, and my advisor Dr. John Newhagen, who immediately saw the potential in this project and sparked years of stimulating discussions afterward. Dr. Alice Bonner generously shared her moral support and exhaustive knowledge of Washington history. Thanks Dr. William E. Smith for introducing me to ethnomusicology. My homeboy Dr. Jonathan Dueck gave a non-intimidating introduction to high-tech ethnography. Dr. Carolina Robertson, Dr. Carol Roberts and Dr. Nancy Struna introduced me to postmodernism and qualitative research. Dr. Patricia Hill Collins, for the encouragement and wise counsel about this project. And thank you, Dr. Linda Steiner who arrived on campus just in time to give me nudge across the finish line.



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## Chapter 1: A Black Public Sphere

### Overview

Go-go is a black music style born in Washington, D.C. in the mid-1970s. This funk-based vernacular music genre is characterized by its distinctive beat: pulsing bass drum, timbales, cowbells, and roto-toms layered with synthesizers and a horn section. Go-go music is a live experience communally constructed via a dialogue of movement and chants between the audience and band (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). A guitarist named Chuck Brown created the go-go sound in the mid-1970s, inspiring generations of Washington area musicians to follow. The go-go performance tradition brings together an array of communicative styles and scripts including dance, slang, hand-signs, and clothing—all unique to life in the Washington, D.C. area.

In addition to its use to describe a particular musical genre, the term “go-go” also describes the physical space in which live concerts take place in a specific, often fleeting, moment. The word “go-go” use as a noun is best exemplified by the classic song by go-go band Rare Essence, “Take Me Out to the Go-Go,” a title also borrowed by a leading go-go magazine and online community, [tmottgogo.com](http://tmottgogo.com). For three decades, go-go has been the way of life in and around the District of Columbia, where multiple bands perform each day of the week and it is the most visible representation of black youth culture (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). Go-gos take place anywhere the genre’s musicians and fans gather, including backyards, street corners, firehouses, community centers, middle schools, parks, government buildings, restaurants, skating rinks, corner stores, nightclubs, and college campuses. These happenings are

advertised via glossy fliers passed out in school hallways, corner stores, record shops, and clothing boutiques. They are also advertised by Day-glo posters tacked up on trees and street signs, paid announcements on urban-format FM radio stations such as 93.9 WKYS and 95.5 WPGC, online communities such as [www.papalace.com](http://www.papalace.com) and [www.tmottgogo.com](http://www.tmottgogo.com), and, more rarely, free listings in newspapers such as the *Washington City Paper* and the *Washington Post*.<sup>1</sup>

The go-go culture is supported by a large, extended network of local and almost exclusively black-owned businesses.<sup>2</sup> Mom & pop storefronts where go-go affiliated clothing lines, live recordings, and concert tickets are sold, as well as design firms where advertisements are created and printed, are located in most neighborhoods in the District of Columbia and neighboring Prince George's County. The scope of the go-go community's expansive economic, social, and political web was brought into focus in Spring 2007, when several of the most popular go-go nightclubs were targeted for closure because of violence reported around the establishments in Prince George's County, Maryland, just outside the District of Columbia city limits (Rondeaux & Helderman 2007). Within minutes of the official action, an online marketing company sent electronic notice for a "go-go Emergency Meeting" specifically summoning "band members, fans, sound techs, security, bartenders, club owners, graphics companies, djs" for a meeting to plan a response. Within days, the Go-Go Coalition, Inc. and the Peaceaholics, a go-go affiliated political group, gathered 100 singers, musicians, religious leaders, sound engineers, club owners, political activists for a protest march to the county seat in Upper Marlboro, Maryland (Thomas-Lester, 2007). The group presented a letter that argued

that the club closures showed “a disregard for the economic impact on the numerous families beyond the employees of the specific venues closed ” (Go-Go Coalition, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

As Lornell & Stephenson (2001) write, “Go-go is more than just music; it’s a complex expression of cultural values masquerading in the guise of party music in our nation’s capital.”

Go-go musicians unite people within the black community, providing the otherwise voiceless a forum in which to speak. Go-go reflects the concerns of black citizens living in D.C. in very public ways; over the years, it has been used by political leaders as rallies; served as the principal draw at numerous community celebrations and block parties, and has been the sole entertainment at huge outdoor concerts. Whether it is a youthful Junk Yard finding and making their own instruments while growing up in the Barry Farms project of Sugar Bear from E.U. singing about the use of guns on the streets, go-go musicians call upon their everyday experiences to create this music. (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001, p.15)

In concert with all of these commonly accepted definitions of go-go, this dissertation argues that go-go is more than these things: It also functions as a black public sphere and kind of news medium. This chapter will discuss the public sphere as theorized in the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s 1962 work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Then, several relevant critiques of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere and other relevant black public sphere theories applicable to realm of black, urban communities will be explored. Finally, this chapter concludes with an analysis of the structural transformation of go-go.

## **Habermas's Public Sphere**

On the surface level, few discursive spaces are more divergent from the modern-day go-go scene than the 18<sup>th</sup> century European coffee houses and salons which Habermas (1962/1989) theorized as the ideal public sphere. While the coffee houses that proliferated during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are the most commonly associated with Habermas, the English translator to the 1989 edition of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* noted Habermas's notion of a "public sphere" and "publicity" actually referred to several kinds of "public spheres," including the "literary public sphere," and the representative publicness, or a "display of inherent spiritual power or dignity before an audience" (Habermas, 1962/1989, xv).

To Habermas, this ideal public sphere assembled people to engage in a rational-critical discussion of political matters which emerged during the transition from a feudal political order based on "patrimonial slave economy" to a liberal democracy ruled with the consent of the governed (Habermas, 1962/1989, p.3). Habermas traces the structural evolution of the public sphere throughout European history. Under the feudal system, the staging of publicity was tied to "personal attributes such as insignia (badges and arms), dress (clothing and coiffure), demeanor (form of greeting and poise) and rhetoric (form of address and formal discourse in general). For the feudal nobility, virtue was something that had to be publicly represented through forums such as the joust, which often had no particular or definite locations but took place "constantly and everywhere" (Habermas, 1962/1989, p.8). Habermas noted that in feudal times, publicity was "something like a status attribute" (Habermas, 1962/1989, p.7).

Notably, according to Habermas, music played a role in the emergence of a public in the transition out of feudalism. Because, commoners rarely had the opportunity to enjoy music outside of church or noble society, the first music concerts were an early form of publicity. The first admission for payments transformed the musical performances into commodities—music not tied to purpose. “For the first time an audience gathered to listen to music as such—a public of music lovers to which anyone who was propertied and educated was admitted....within a public everyone was entitled to judge” (Habermas, 1989/1962, p. 40). These public occasions held a “monopoly” on the first publication as a “new work, even a musical one, had to legitimate itself first in this forum (Habermas, 1962/1989, p.34).

The primary focus of Habermas’s sociological, historical analysis was clearly the public sphere epitomized by the coffee house scene, but also included parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs, meetings halls, and other public places that could facilitate face-to-face discourse. For instance, in the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century London alone, Habermas noted that 3,000 coffee houses operated, each with its core group of regulars (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 32). During their heyday, these were the physical locus of “public, rational-critical debate of private people as a public and a public presentation of either individual or collective private interests” (Habermas 1989/1962, 192).

Habermas chronicled the structural transformation over time of the public sphere from a physical space to a realm of mass communication-- the “media of the public sphere,” such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. In this transition from “live” to a mediated public sphere, an independent journalism



tradition was established that asserted itself against the government and that made critical commentary and public opposition against the government part of the normal state of affairs, i.e. the “Fourth Estate.” Journals and journalists became the carriers of public criticism, critical debate of political issues.

Given that Habermas was part of the Frankfurt School, it is no surprise that the role of capital figured prominently in his structural analysis. Early forms of journalism emerged in connection with the market economy as news itself was originally a commodity for merchants needing time-sensitive data about new and emerging markets. Habermas notes the transformation of the social and economic structure of news over time: First as vehicles for the transportation of valuable information, then “dealers of public opinion” and then in itself “an object of consumption” with the rise of the advertising industry. To Habermas, the modern-day press and broadcast media came to serve less as organs of public information and debate than technologies for managing consensus and promoting consumer culture. The more the “public sphere assumes advertising functions, the more it can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda, the more it becomes unpolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatized” (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 175).

The integration of mass entertainment with advertising resulted in a “refeudalization” of the public sphere, Habermas feared. “Along with its communal basis, the public sphere lost its place. It lost a clear boundary over against the private sphere on the one hand and the “world public” on the other; it lost its transparency and no longer admitted of a comprehensive view”(Habermas, 1989/1962, p. 203).

## From Habermas to a Black Public Sphere

Habermas claims his exclusively bourgeois public sphere—he notes that only property-owning men participated—“leaves aside the *plebeian* public sphere” because it was a “variant” that was suppressed in the historical process (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. xviii). Fraser (1992) challenges this assertion on two fronts. One, she rejects the notion that this “comprehensive view” of the bourgeois public sphere speaks for the so-called variants: women, gays, people of color and *plebeian* classes. Second, she rejects the idea that these other voices were ever completely suppressed. She argues there has historically always existed a multitude of public spheres, or in her phrasing “subaltern counterpublics,” which discursively construct their own reality. To Fraser, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere reflects a shift from a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one carried out with the acquiescence of the newly empowered bourgeois classes anxious to rule their socioeconomic underlings. Fraser argues that for the public sphere to truly approach the democratic ideal, it must be radically reconceptualized in ways that allow for the human agency within this “multiplicity of publics” which have always been in existence. Fraser argued:

Multicultural societies cannot consist exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere. That would be tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens. Moreover, since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others and thereby make discursive assimilation a condition for participation in public debate. (Fraser, 1992, p.126)

Many black cultural critics agree that a multitude of publics exist. Because of blacks' legal status as "property" in the United States historical context, the role of capital also plays a particularly central role in how the black public sphere has been theorized. The black popular music scholar Neal argues that the dismantling of chattel slavery preceded the emergence of a black "public" with the black press and black music serving as the primary sites of public expression and primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the black experience. Neal argued that black music venues also served a similar function in the "Black Public Sphere," the so-called "chitlin' circuit" of black nightclubs, juke joints and after-hours clubs helped to create common aesthetic and cultural sensibilities among the black Diaspora amidst changing migration patterns and demographics following World War II (Neal, 1999, p.30).

The sociologist Liebow's (1967) canonic ethnography *Tally's Corner* theorized that small business such as record shops, along with carry-outs, had recently joined taverns, pool halls, liquor stores, corner groceries, rooming house, secondhand stores, credit houses, pawn shops and storefront churches as parts of a "distinctive complex of urban institutions" reflecting the evolving needs and tastes of inner city residents in Washington, D.C. in the 1960s. Lewis (1967) argues that these sites serve more than their outward functions, including as "informal communication centers, forums, places to display and assess talents and staging areas for a range of activities, legal, illegal and extralegal. And although they exist in the heart of the city, they are like outpost institutions—gathering places for outsiders in the center of the city."

These are the gathering places referred to here as the public sphere, which rely heavily on “face-to-face relationships of the personal network” (p. vii).

The Black Public Sphere Collective<sup>4</sup> (1995) applied Fraser’s notion of a “subaltern counterpublic” in the context of black American music, the black underground economy and black consumption as primary sites of a black public sphere. The collective provides a good overview of the black public sphere and its role in scholarly life in contrast to Habermasian notions of a public sphere:

The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary—does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons and highbrow tracts. It draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship, and circulation. Its task is not the provision of security for the freedom of conversation among intellectuals, as was the case with the bourgeois public spheres of earlier centuries. Rather it marks a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States. (Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995, p.2)

While Fraser’s term “subaltern counterpublic” as a descriptive is precise, unapologetically embracing this notion of a public sphere recognizes the agency of marginalized groups and allows them, linguistically, at least, take their rightful place at the center of what is traditionally known as the public sphere. Henceforth, I accept the Black Public Sphere Collective belief that the power of this utopian theoretical framework as articulated by Habermas can be appreciated with a simple linguistic shift to “*a* public sphere,” versus the hegemonic “*the* public sphere.” Henceforth, the preferred term to describe go-go will be “a public sphere.”

## **Ritual, Music, and News**

Habermas bemoaned what was lost in the transformation of the public sphere from physical places to the realm of the mass media. However, it was really the *rituals* surrounding coffee house and salon gatherings that were altered in the transformation of the public sphere. But, pace Habermas, ritualistic aspects of the public-critical discussions did not end when they entered the realm of mass media. As Carey wrote, even in emerging mass media technologies, “we are dealing with an old story rather than a new one” (Carey, 1992, p.2). Carey defines communication as a “symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.” These processes are constantly breaking down throughout history, and each society must update and restore the basic rituals. Whatever the technological manifestation, the links between common, community and communication remain constant. In Carey’s ritual approach to communication, a newspaper, for instance, is less about transmitting data than the ceremony around the process of picking up the paper and reading a dramatically satisfying presentation of reality that diverges or conforms to the established social order—much like attending a religious mass:

Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it. (Carey, 1992, p.21)

This ritual form of communication has myriad applications outside what Habermas conceived of as the public sphere. In his work on television, cultural theorist Fiske (1987) notes that all texts are always polysemic—susceptible to

multiple interpretations and always leaky through the use of devices such as irony, metaphor, jokes, and contradiction. Music is a genre that is by definition leaky, a reality with particular utility for marginalized groups. Baker notes that during the Civil Rights Movement, music became its own form of cultural and leadership capital both in religious and secular contexts, an expressive mode that “helped to create a completely different set of associative and communicative norms within black America” (Baker, 1995, p.20).

In her studies of urban South African identity during the 1950s, ethnomusicologist Allen (1990) demonstrated how popular Nigerian musicians would literally “sing the news,” making recordings ripped from the latest headlines, gossip, and controversies. Allen notes that the ability of cryptic lyrics to accommodate multiple interpretations is useful in a repressive political climate in which coded messages can fly below the consciousness of law enforcement. Allen showed that when people cannot protest openly, they use hidden transcripts—critiques of the dominant public discourse in the form of jokes, songs or gestures (Allen, 1990).

Waterman’s (1990) study of juju, a popular contemporary Nigerian music that can be considered a cousin of go-go, described how current events, particularly political developments, are continuously encoded in popular song texts. Traditional drummers were “the drums and songs were in effect the local newspapers and propaganda leaflets”—most of the songs were political in nature. The music was an integral part of the contemporary Nigerian urban information economy, reflecting the currents of the Nigerian oil economy (Waterman, 1990).

Several hip-hop historians and scholars have studied the origins of hip-hop as a live, mediated environment and community-based art form that evolved into a cross-cultural global community to deliver the news. (Chang, 2005; George, 1998; Rose, 1994) discuss how hip-hop language, dance and music form oppositional transcripts of the unofficial truths that comprise communal bases of knowledge about social conditions. Kelley (1994) noted that gangsta rappers wrote lyrics intended to convey a sense of social realism, “a sort of “street ethnography” or “street journalism” of racist institutions and social practices often told in first person. Rose (1994) and Neal (1999) likewise described hip-hop as an attempt by young urban blacks to use mass-culture to facilitate communal discourse across a more greatly dispersed black community following the Civil Rights Movement.

Chang (2005), George (1998), and Rose (1994) all cite Chuck D of the hip-hop group Public Enemy’s oft-repeated description of the early days of rap as a “Black CNN.” According to Chuck D, (nee Carlton Ridenhour) the rapper or emcee would paint a visual picture with his words to describe what life was like in their community for those outside the community, so that “people all over could get informed about black life in those areas without checking the [mainstream] news. Every time we checked for ourselves on the news they were locking us up anyway, so the interpretation coming from Rap was a lot clearer” (Ridenhour & Jah, 1998, p.252). Thus this “variant” view of black life articulated within this sphere becomes a form of news. Go-go and hip-hop developed along similar functional tracks for their first decade. In the mid-1980s, they took wildly divergent paths, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

## **The Structural Transformation of Go-Go**

Habermas's public sphere came about during specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy making the transition from feudal or private governance to a more democratic form. Similarly, a constellation of historical, political, racial, and legal shifts unique to black communities in Washington, D.C. in the 1970s, gave rise to the emergence of go-go as a public sphere.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, legally enforced racial segregation created a black "city within a city" in Washington, D.C. comprised of leisure, retail, housing, and many kinds of services unavailable to blacks in other parts of the city (Cultural Tourism D.C., 1999-2007). After the Civil Rights Movement resulted in new laws prohibiting racial segregation, this led to wide-scale black middle-class flight to the suburbs. It also resulted in a concentration of black poverty in the city's inner core in communities that were previously economically—if not racially—diverse. By 1957, Washington, D.C. had a black majority. By 1968 blacks were 67 percent of the District of Columbia population, highest in any major American city (Gilbert, 1968, p.3). The black communities of Washington, D.C. suffered an even more crushing blow following the 1968 assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.: The city erupted in riots, which resulted in 1,000 fires and 900 businesses damaged (Gilbert, 1968, p.178). Rioters burned the city's economic infrastructure in black neighborhoods primarily owned by ethnic whites, Jews, and immigrants (Gilbert, 1968, p.189). The hardest hit areas were major corridors such as U Street (which will be discussed in Chapter 4) and H Street (which will be discussed in Chapter 5).



In the wake of the riots, several organizations pushed for black ownership during the rebuilding process. One organization Build Black Inc., declared: “No more mom & pop stores, slumlords and other exploiters of black people allowed in black communities.” They also vowed to banish from the city white unions that exclude black workers from contracting jobs done in black neighborhoods (Gilbert, 1968, p.217). The Black United Front (BUF), a coalition of Negro action groups, similarly declared in early May 1968: “We wish to emphasize very strongly that black people are going to rebuild this black community” (Gilbert, 1968, p.217).

In U.S. cities across the country, a high density of black residents lived in the urban core after legally enforced integration. However this demographic shift took on the most symbolic meaning in the nation’s capital, which was given the moniker “Chocolate City” thanks to a 1970s musical recording by funk band Parliament Funkadelic, called “Chocolate City.” Neal explains: “Narrator George Clinton uses a radio broadcast as device through which to instruct his audiences about the burgeoning black nationalism of the urban terrain. Clinton’s narrative privileges electoral politics as the site of a nationalist assault of the urban landscape” (Neal, 1999, p.115).

In the mid-1970s, George Clinton’s promise of black electoral power came to fruition as blacks took the political reigns of the Chocolate City. Throughout most of Washington, D.C.’s history, a Congressional committee and appointed mayor governed the urban terrain. The passage of the District of Columbia Home Rule Act of 1973 allowed some self-governance, and in the fall of 1974, District citizens elected a black mayor and council for the first time.<sup>5</sup> However, another post-Civil

Rights paradox was that these newly enfranchised black leaders governed a greatly diminished tax base due to middle class white and black flight, and a physically depressed, riot-scarred infrastructure.

Lornell & Stephenson (2001) date the emergence of go-go to 1976. At that time, in the U.S. the post-Industrial, post-integration economic conditions of urban areas gave rise to what Venkatesh calls “underground economies,” part of a “parallel urban world” which developed mirror institutions to the mainstream. Venkatesh noted that after integration, the underground economy quickly became a primary economy for many black urban dwellers as buying off-the-books goods became a pattern of survival. “Entrepreneurs are foundations of the community operating in a very different public sphere, exempt from yellow pages listings and business cards: they can be found in homes, on designated alleyways and street corners, and in bars and restaurants” (Venkatesh, 2006, p.93).

It may be true, as the political scientist Dawson (1995) contends, that structural shifts in the post-Fordist and post-Industrial U.S. economy eroded institutional bases of the black counterpublic. But his conclusion that a black counterpublic has not existed since the 1970s is wrong. In fact, this is precisely the set of circumstances that allowed for new forms of urban public spheres to emerge. This social, political and economic transformation of urban centers left a power vacuum that led to the rise of underground economies that snatched their own cultural and economic power. In mid-1970s Bronx, New York, that was hip-hop (Chang, 2005). In mid-1970s Washington, D.C., this came in the form of go-go.

Hip-hop originated as a community-based art form that included deejaying, emceeing or rapping, breakdancing and graffiti. In their first decade, go-go and hip-hop cultures developed along roughly parallel tracks as communicative mediums knitting their respective urban communities. By riding emerging mass media of cable music channels and multinational music distribution corporations that signed and promoted them, hip-hop eventually became a dominant expression of youth culture worldwide. The cultural geography of New York, which is the financial capital, and Los Angeles, the entertainment capital, made it possible for global companies to co-opt and globalize hip-hop.

In its divergent path from hip-hop, go-go can be viewed as a kind of counter-discourse, a statement on how a black public sphere should be structured, culturally, aesthetically, and economically. In Chapter 3, “Call & Response,” I discuss how go-go’s cultural scripts are faithful to a centuries old cross-Atlantic dialogue between West Africa and the black Diaspora. Economically, the go-go public sphere is black-owned and heavily guarded, a possibility that only exists because of the cultural geography of Washington, D.C. The metropolitan area boasts the largest, best-educated and most prosperous black economic base in the country, the historic and political reasons for which are discussed in detail in Chapter 4 “Club U.” In the 1980s when go-go was at the height of its popularity, Washington, D.C. was also home to a specific underground economy: among the nation’s most lucrative crack cocaine markets (Berke, 1989). These two distinct black markets emerged simultaneously and symbiotically with the go-go industry. Both of these poles, what Familiar Faces bandleader Donnell Floyd calls the “underbelly” and the “upper crust” of the city that

make up go-go fandom will be explored in this dissertation. In Chapter 7, “1986,” I analyze a classic go-go show by Rare Essence that spotlighted major players in Washington’s crack economy years before mainstream media. In Chapter 6, “Liveness,” I “read” the news told at a Backyard Band go-go performance at the University of Maryland’s College Park campus 20 year later.

Long after mainstream hip-hop ceased to serve this function, live go-go performances and the satellite economy are still a “black CNN.” In the live performance, go-go, news content is guided by the lead “talker,” the band leader who tells stories via his freestyle compositions which incorporate everything from commentary about current events and “rest in peace” messages to commemorate deceased fans, to shout-outs, or calling out the names of various fans, crews, and neighborhoods from the stage. The audience members participate in the creation of the text by throwing up hand signs that represent their neighborhoods and crews, displaying words written on T-shirts and raising their hands to be acknowledged. Each person knows the script, or code, for carrying out these functions, decreasing uncertainty of the message and increasing the authenticity of the live experience.

The go-gos are also the place to learn about what Tuchman (1973) called “soft news” that reflects the texture of human life. It is the place to find out the latest cultural styles, products, services, and fashions available for purchase in the local black economic network. The live recordings, or P.A. tapes are also sometimes spliced with commentaries from the lead talker to patronize certain businesses. Go-go has guarded this network by stubbornly resisting the standardization of black youth culture that has been ceded to hip-hop culture in much of the rest of the U.S. and

beyond. In Washington, go-go has remained the dominant manifestation of black youth culture, with styles in fashion, slang, and dance that are rooted in Washington, D.C.

Habermas might call this sort of media/advertising synergy “refeudalization,” and the parallels to feudal forms of publicity and go-go are unmistakable. This, however, is done with full transparency. One go-go magazine editor marveled at the resilience of Rare Essence, a marquee brand in go-go known for its legendary financial acumen and constantly changing lineup. “Rare Essence is not a band,” Kato, editor of Tmottgogo.com shrugged.” It’s a company that employs musicians” (Personal communication, April 2006).

Consumption itself is intertwined with identity and racial politics within the black public sphere. The anthropologists Coombe and Stoller note that buying and wearing certain black-affiliated trademarks represent a form of publicity that “proclaims a politics of pride from within the community” and asserts a “counterpublicity” (Coombe & Stoller, 1995, p. 271). The law professor Austin notes two strains of how black consumption has been theorized in the context of constructing a black public sphere: The first, “consumption as alienation”—that is, blacks consume conspicuously to compensate for the humiliation and disappointments of life as marginalized group, a form of hedonism often associated with the crack trade and the hedonism of the Reagan era. The second is “consumption as resistance”—that is consumption is about pleasure, performance and participation in prosperity. Austin notes that in late capitalism, all cultures are turned into commodities, not just black American culture. “There is nothing wrong with

consciously connecting culture to consumption and production if the goal is the increase the availability of employment among blacks and the wealth controlled by black institutions and firms” (Austin, 2005, p. 243).

In closing, the structural transformation of go-go as a public sphere has roughly gone as follows: Go-go began as a discursive space in which to speak to the reality of life in Washington D.C. While go-go culture still maintains that function, it has also evolved into an industry that has capitalized on the links between consumption, identity, and economic power in creating a counterpublic discourse. As one Washington, D.C.-based black clothing line owner who united with dozens of other District-based black clothing lines owners to fend off a Korean competitor explained to me in an interview: “We got two things in this town, urban wear and go-go. This is our culture, our identity” (Hopkinson, 2004, August 10). Guarding an economic and cultural infrastructure that allows the same dollar to circle endlessly through a single community is in effect a statement that is deeply political in a way that Booker T. Washington would appreciate—if not Habermas.

In many ways, Washington, D.C.’s go-go and mainstream bourgeois public spheres appear to be separate and diametrically opposed. In reality, however, these are two overlapping spheres, as the poet Thomas Sayers Ellis explained (Personal communication, 2005). He is right: Federal Washington and Black Washington share the same geography, the same history, often quite literally the same space. If anything, they are two sides of the proverbial coin.

Go-go represents just one such counterpublic, a tributary of the dominant/mainstream public sphere, and the latest in a beginning-less line of public spheres that

have been turning throughout history. Go-go is one of Washington, D.C.'s—and the nation's—many hidden transcripts. In the hypertextual sense, each go-go shout-out is a footnote, referencing the people in the room and the neighborhoods, blocks and communities where they reside—beyond the police blotter. The sociocultural context of the footnotes presents a flood of other unheard stories about Washington, D.C. As a discursive set of communication practices in particular, go-go offers greater validity and specificity than “mainstream” news reports. Hence, go-go offers an alternate, but nonetheless, valid reality of life in the nation's capital.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### Overview

Qualitative research strategies are uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues because they allow for flexibility and ambiguity (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Contemporary qualitative research is in what Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe as “postexperimental, ‘messy’ moment” in which the voices on the margins are moving to the center (p.611). A non-quantitative approach is particularly well suited to the study of go-go and how this music and culture functions as a public sphere and kind of news medium. This study combines ethnography and methods associated with disciplines outside communication, such as cultural geography and ethnomusicology. I integrate these methods to explore the dimensions of go-go as a public sphere and ultimately “read” the news communicated in go-go. I draw on a variety of epistemologies including feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theories. I also employ an arts-informed, multimedia approach.

Although the focus of this study is not gender per se, feminist research methods are a guiding tenet of how this project was designed and carried out. There are several notable epistemological stances that characterize feminist research that are of particular value to my research on go-go. Feminists view research as a cooperative, non-hierarchical process that is decidedly *not* objective (Letherby, 2003). Feminist researchers emphasize that the class, history, and gender attributes of the researchers must be critically examined, and ethical practice means carefully considering the consequences for those who participate in the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Olesen, 2003). One of the many contributions of feminist



researchers is the realization that the production of knowledge is an act of power, and that what may be presented in research accounts as neat, orderly and “hygienic” is infinitely messier and complex (Letherby, 2003).

Under feminist, postcolonial and critical race theory epistemologies, the cultural self that the researcher brings is not “bias” but a set of resources to be used (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Collins, 2000; Agawu, 2003). In this case, although go-go is a genre that is overwhelmingly male dominated, my identity as a black woman and non-native Washingtonian can serve as one social location for examining points of connection among multiple epistemologies. As Collins (2000) wrote: “Being outsider-within locations can foster new angles of vision” (p.11).

This project is not “auto-ethnography” however, it is important to connect my own “messy” experiences to this topic. In what is sometimes described as classic ethnography pioneered by the anthropologist Margaret Meade, researchers often travel to distant lands and return home from “the field,” where they write and present their analyses. In my case, since I began living in the neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. in 1994, “the field” has been all around me. The teenagers on my block are “into” go-go and many of my students at the University of Maryland were lifelong go-go fans. To further complicate the “field” of the go-go public sphere, my interest in this subject began in my role as a writer for the *Washington Post*. This newspaper is a dominant public sphere in Washington that has a complicated relationship with the go-go community.

Because of these and other complexities unique to this particular field, ethical concerns come to the forefront. Therefore, a detailed discussion of how I “entered”

the go-go public sphere is in order. Following my discussion of my entrée into “the field,” I will provide a short discussion of ethical concerns and how I have attempted to reconcile contradictions between journalistic and ethnographic methodological approaches. Finally, I will provide an overview of the logistics of how I collected and analyzed information for each of the chapters, as well as how the scholarly literature speaks to those methods.

### **The Field**

I first “entered” the field upon my arrival to the District of Columbia as a Howard University freshman in August 1994. Driving into the city for the first time with my mother, I turned one of the local hip-hop radio stations and heard a song with heavy drums and call & response. Later I would learn that this music was go-go, and I had actually heard it for the first time years earlier when the soundtrack to the 1988 Spike Lee film “School Daze,” produced a hit video and single by the go-go band EU (Experience Unlimited), “Da Butt.” I don’t recall any interaction with the go-go scene as a Howard undergraduate, which may speak to how the go-go community can sometimes be set apart, both racially and socioeconomically.<sup>6</sup> As Lornell & Stephenson (2001) explain: “As an African American musical phenomenon, go-go already has to worry about race, but it also wears the mantle of low-class or blue-collar music. None of these factors engenders an increasingly diverse audience, and go-go remains ghettoized” (p. 47).

Soon after graduation, I took a job producing an arts guide for *The Prince George’s Extra*, a weekly supplement to the *Washington Post* distributed to suburban

subscribers who lived in Prince George's County, Maryland. Looking for events to include in the calendar and local artists to profile, I came across the online magazine [www.tmottgogo.com](http://www.tmottgogo.com), which listed multiple go-go shows. The Web site also promoted a new book by Kip Lornell and Charles Stephenson, Jr., *The Beat: Go-Go's Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop*. Lornell, a white man and ethnomusicologist at George Washington University, joined forces with Stephenson, a black man who is former go-go manager and cultural activist. The book laid an invaluable foundation for journalists, academics, and fans through an impressive number of interviews with bands, advertisers, clothing entrepreneurs, managers, record company owners, distributors, and activists. The authors' work, along with that of Kevin "Kato" Hammond, who founded the website [www.tmottgogo.com](http://www.tmottgogo.com) in 1997, have provided an entry point for outsiders such as me to enter into the dialogue of this unique black public sphere.

Around early 2002, I began to focus on incorporating go-go into the *Post's* Prince George's arts guide. Much to my surprise, go-go bands were not interested in the free publicity I was offering. When I tried to contact bands, my phone calls were ignored. When I left handwritten notes for some retail business owners, they were not returned. I made headway for the first time when I contacted gospel go-go band, Submission Band. After I interviewed the church-based band for a profile (Hopkinson, 2002a), their sound engineer, a man named Richard O'Connor handed me a scribbled note. The note that said in addition to being a sound engineer, Richard was also a writer for [tmottgogo.com](http://tmottgogo.com) under several pseudonyms, including Bubba Ray

Spearchucker and Johnny “Tha” Foxx, and he would like to help me if I was interested in learning more about the go-go scene.

Richard was born and raised in the Washington, D.C. area, earned a history degree from the University of California at Berkeley, and has taught at various elite private schools in suburban Montgomery County, Maryland. He also managed a teenage go-go band and co-owned a go-go record label. Ever since that day we met in 2002, he has been an invaluable friend and resource. In addition to our shared suburban upbringing and Caribbean heritage—Richard is of Trinidadian descent, I am of Guyanese descent—he has also straddled the cultural worlds of both elite educational institutions and go-go. Like Kato, his business partner at the go-go label and editor at [tmottgogo.com](http://tmottgogo.com), which bills itself as the “official gateway to a Washington, DC urban culture,” Richard was always looking for opportunities for the go-go scene to get greater exposure.

A young *Post* photographer, Marvin Joseph, and I spent much of the summer of 2002 at an all-ages (under 21) go-go scene with Richard vouching for us and introducing us to teenage fans whom we interviewed and photographed about the styles, fashion, and dance trends at the go-go. This kind of access would have been impossible without Richard’s help. Richard’s use of pseudonyms in his own writing for [tmottgogo.com](http://tmottgogo.com) speaks to the challenges of writing about go-go in a public forum. Richard had hoped that [tmottgogo.com](http://tmottgogo.com) and the occasionally printed glossy magazine *Take Me Out to the Go-Go* could become the equivalent of the hip-hop bible *The Source* magazine. He said writing under a variety of bylines helped give readers the impression that there “was an actual staff.” The other reason spoke directly to the

challenges of maintaining a rational-critical discussion in this kind of emerging public sphere. Richard explained: “Also, I enjoyed the anonymity. When you are working within cultures like hip-hop and Go-Go honest journalistic criticism is seldom welcome or embraced. Look at how many hip-hop writers get jumped for writing things people don't agree with. So the pen names protected my identity while still allowing me to offer a candid insider's view” (Personal email communication, 2007).

My own experience entering the go-go scene as an outsider (non-Washingtonian and member of the “mainstream” media) meant I had challenges of my own. I do share the same ethnicity (black) as most of the go-go scene. However, whatever racial camaraderie I might have enjoyed was mostly negated by my status as a writer for the *Washington Post*.<sup>7</sup> To wit: in late 2002, Richard arranged my first interview with Ralph Genghis Anwan Glover, or Big G, a.k.a. The Ghetto Prince, the leader of the Backyard Band whose 2006 performance is described in Chapter 6 “Liveness.” Before the interview, Richard made sure I understood what a big deal it was to interview Ghenghis, who was not yet 30, but had achieved street celebrity status and rarely gave media interviews. Richard likened my embarking on a *Post* profile to the FBI opening up an investigation. To some the *Washington Post* is equivalent to the police, so I was in effect “The Enemy,” he told me.

Both then and now, go-go is represented often in local mainstream news media outlets such as the *Post*. However, it is almost always in connection with a club shooting or violence and rarely as an art form or cultural and political force.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I was viewed with a wary eye by the band and many others whom I interviewed about Ghenghis, from political activists, to fans, and club owners. All

were highly protective of Ghenghis and when I contacted them, they immediately called Ghenghis's management to let them know I had come around asking questions. That warning from Richard would be a harbinger of my experiences trying to mediate between the larger public sphere symbolized by the *Post* and the smaller, overlapping public sphere symbolized by go-go.

I am not a fan in the same sense that many DC natives are; the more conventional fans of go-go have heard go-go their whole lives and collect live go-go recordings known as P.A.s, and religiously attend shows. I was born in 1976, and grew up suburban in Canada, Indianapolis, Indiana, and then Palm Beach County, Florida. My parents are college-educated professionals who migrated from their native Guyana, South America. Although I am a lifelong hip-hop fan and have studied black performing arts for most of my life (my mother was an executive at a historic black theater in Indianapolis) I'm very much an immigrant, culturally speaking, to go-go. I don't know all the hand signs, don't recognize all the neighborhoods being shouted out, can't pick up many of the dance and call & response patterns that others know. If not for research I would not listen to live P.A.s for instance, because I have difficulties penetrating the sounds to be able to understand what is on the recordings.

I do, however, enjoy the energy of the live shows. Whatever my reason for being there at a particular moment--journalist, researcher, DC resident, black radio listener, mom, and wife--being on the go-go scene was usually fun. I tried to integrate my research into my everyday life as much as possible. On a whim, I took my husband—a hip-hop fan that had never been to a go-go—to checkout the SOS

Band at the Takoma Station nightclub. I took my then-two-year-old daughter with me to see Chuck Brown perform at an outdoor concert at the Anacostia Museum, and my then-five-year-old son has stopped by with me to see “Go-Go Nico” at his music store on H Street. The whole family saw Chuck Brown when a jazz singer-friend of ours opened for him at a concert on the Mall. I try to catch the daily go-go hour on the local FM radio stations whenever possible. Thus I have spent a significant amount of time in and around various go-gos, as a reporter, as a researcher, and as a resident of Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup> As a writer I am always drawing on my experiences, whatever the context. As the philosopher Mills notes: “Writers are famous for scouting for material wherever life places them” (Mills, 2004, p. 104). Some of my most valuable insights have come from living in the field and serendipitously coming upon a scene.

### **Journalism, Ethnography, and Go-Go**

The lack of scholarship and textured news coverage of go-go also reflects the formidable will of the community itself. Much of the go-go culture operates how Venkatesh (2006) describes as “off the books” and thus derives much their economic and cultural power from operating under the radar and off the IRS grid (Foxy, 2002). In general, subcultures strive to render themselves impenetrable to outsiders, particularly in the media and academy (Hedberg, 1979; Hall, 1978). As the cultural theorist Thornton (1995) noted in her ethnography of the 1990s London underground club music scene, subcultures avoid the media for fear that their knowledge will be released to the world, therefore diminishing their power.

This makes Lornell & Stephenson's 2001 ethnography of go-go a significant accomplishment. The shared authorship between a member of the go-go community and an academic researcher appeared to alleviate the "crisis of representation" discussed by many scholars (Clifford, 1988; Burr, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln 2003) who have called for the democratization of the research relationship. To me, the payoff exemplified by the Lornell & Stephenson collaboration speaks to how productive these kinds of arrangements can ultimately be. To date, it is the only book-length published scholarly treatment of go-go.

Applying those insights into coverage of the black cultural scene at the Washington Post, however, proved to be difficult. I left my position in Prince George's for another reporting job at the *Post* writing about youth culture for the newspaper's Style section, which includes long-form journalism and cultural criticism. I co-wrote an article about the local urban wear scene that had been operating in all corners of DC and Prince George's since the early 1980s. (The local fashion industry was one aspect of go-go that Lornell & Stephenson did not include in their book.) At the time the fashion lines were ubiquitous at go-gos and fans wore labels to indicate what neighborhood they were from.

The article included a survey of several of the most popular brands, and at the time, there were several dozen lines operating. But the focal point of the article was one of the most talented of the designers. This designer was not interested in the publicity, but after weeks of my pursuit, he reluctantly agreed to be a part of the story. Before the story went to press, he said he had a change of heart and wanted the detail about his past criminal record be omitted from the story. He feared public disclosure



could put his store employees and company in danger. I couldn't decide whether this request was public relations spin or a real danger. But I also felt the story worked just as well without this detail from his distant past. I was not successful in convincing the editors to leave it out of the story. I tried to abandon the story altogether, which led to many lectures and admonishments about my lack of "objectivity." The profile was eventually published with the detail about the criminal record included.<sup>10</sup>

Several of my *Post* supervisors reminded me that including this kind of information from police records was a "core" tenet of journalism. Journalists Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) would agree. In their widely used journalism manual, they write: the "journalist's first obligation is to the truth" and "its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover." The journalism professor Harrington argues that the ethical responsibility is not to the "subjects" but to readers whom journalists aim to inform as the ultimate justification for press freedoms. Harrington wrote: "As journalists we usually name names, unlike ethnographers who hide their subjects' identity supposedly to protect them. We use real names because we believe it lends authenticity to our stories and because the truth and accuracy of those stories can then be tested" (Harrington, 2003).

The journalism historian Stephens (2005) notes that this scientific-objective view of journalism practice represents one of the last bastions of "certainty, hardheaded realism" where it is believed that facts can be seen independent of interpretation and can be merely collected by reporters: "Reality was out there; journalists merely 'reflected' it – objectively." With the introduction of postmodern theory in the late 1970s, this "objective" view has been reconsidered in the social

sciences. After decades of holding out, Stephens (2005) reported that some stirrings of a “postmodern journalism” began emerging by the mid-2000s that acknowledged a more complicated view of “truth.”

### **Another View of the Ethics and Politics of Representation**

In the realm of academic life writing, in which ethical relationships are “binding matrix,” there are epistemological warrants—and an obligation—to withhold, or not publish information that might do harm (real or imagined) to a respondent. Fine et al (2003) note that traditional social science views researchers as a “contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled.” Meanwhile, “our informants are then left carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality” (Fine et al, 2003, 169).

What many journalism practitioners often forget is that successful negotiation of human contacts in the “field” leads to financial rewards and career advancement for the writer. What do the “subjects” get in return? As the philosopher Mills (2004) points out, journalists may occasionally undertake relationships for instrumental, career-related reasons, and have been known to allow “disasters to proceed before their very eyes just so that they could write about them afterward, or take a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of the carnage” (Mills, 2004, p.103). Author and journalist Nelson reflected on a mainstream newsroom culture which encouraged “faux anthropological” excursions into the black community to reveal what Fine et al (2003) described as a “damaged black psyche”:

For the average white male newspaperman, those worlds beyond the narrow one he inhabits exist primarily as paths to career development. When it comes to black folks, we exist mostly as potential sociological, pathological, or scatological slices of life waiting to be chewed, digested and excreted into the requisite number of column inches in the paper. (Nelson, 1994, p. 62)

In the feminist perspective regarding writing stories about others, researchers *are* beholden to informants. The respondents' needs are prioritized in an attempt to democratize a relationship that is otherwise hopelessly lopsided in favor of the researcher who has final say in the reality of the respondents' lives (Letherby, 2000). When it comes to all life writing, both in the newsroom and in "the field," I now regard the notion of claiming unauthorized ownership of the life stories of private people akin to what the Afrocentric scholar Asante described as an "aggressive seizure of intellectual space [that] like the seizure of land, amounts to the aggressor occupying someone else's territory while claiming it as his own" (Asante, 1987, p. 9).

Following Wilson (1991) I also believe that in general, news media too often privilege "official" sources such as government documents as opposed to first-hand observations (p. 118). Government sources are not always trustworthy, and this also has the effect of giving them the last word on reality, which is always much more complicated than a single report. As Collins notes: "Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which version of truth will prevail" (Collins, 2000, p. 252). The notion that the government (including the police) may lack authority and credibility is relevant in the case of the designer. It is their version of truth from police sources that has always prevailed in the pages of the

*Washington Post* when it comes to the go-go community. This is why I was considered “The Enemy.” In the summer of 2004, at a gathering of local designers for what would be my final *Post* article about the local black cultural scene, I saw the designer whose criminal past I exposed in the pages of the *Washington Post*. As at least a dozen local black designers gathered for a photograph, he jokingly yelled out toward me: “Hey Natalie! Innocent until proven guilty!”

That too, turned out to be a prelude to more drama when that—my final article about the local black cultural scene—was published in August 2004. The article was about several dozen local black designers who had formed Unity Clothing Association to counter the threat from a Korean-born manufacturer flooding the market with cheaper versions of their designs (Hopkinson, 2004b). Following publication, I heard an earful from many of the black designers who were furious because they thought I depicted them as “thugs” in their campaign to chase off the Korean competitor who had hired a black comedian to pretend like his urban wear line was black owned. On the other side, I received nasty voicemail and e-mails from white and Asian readers who said the black designer’s actions were racist, and I was wrong for not labeling them as such. The *Post*’s ombudsman, the readers’ representative, also agreed the designers were racist, and he chastised me in his column for telling the story “almost exclusively from the perspective of the black community” (Getler, 2004).

I found it highly problematic that *Post* readers are not expected to read stories written about the black community from a “black perspective.” For a newspaper published in the Chocolate City, this is highly incongruous, and, yet, highly consistent

with the *Post*'s reputation in the black community: The *Post* writes from the perspective of some mythical mass that does not look like us. Wilson wrote that black reporters who go against the grain are often trapped in a "black journalist's paradox" that "forces them to either ignore the application of news values as they related to African-American cultural experience or assume a conflict posture with newsroom colleagues and superiors in pursuit of changing traditional policy" (Wilson, 1991, p. 142). Thus Nelson noted that for many black journalists "working in mainstream media entails a daily struggle with this notion of objectivity. Each day we are required to justify ourselves, our community, and our story ideas" (Nelson, 1994, p. 86).

Fine et al (2003) note that writing against the grain means speaking aloud about the politics of decisions we make as producers of knowledge—which is despite claims of objectivity, are always political, especially as they intersect with prevailing mass media representations. Journalism practitioners and journalism manuals are rarely as transparent about the ongoing, behind-the-scenes negotiations, the series of access and trades journalists do to maintain a constant flow of information considered valuable, for example, "scoops" coming out of the White House, or the blatant stage management by public relations guarding access to Hollywood celebrities. If there is to be a consistent integration of the Other Washington, D.C., there must be a similar valuation and sustained, respectful, and conscientious commitment to telling those stories.

## **Ethics and GO-GO LIVE**

When I left the newsroom in late 2004, my ethnographer's hat was firmly in place. I did draw on, and even cited, much of my previous long-form, literary-style journalistic writings and analysis on Washington's black cultural landscape I published in the *Post*. As Cole and Knowles (2001) note, perspectives brought forward in mass media may also be important in the formation of a researching agenda and focus because journalistic accounts of a phenomenon can be as much a part of the literature as formal scholarship. However, since beginning the ethnographic research, I did things that I never did previously as a journalist and that would be frowned on in the newsroom, such as prepublication review of research, and finding ways to actively give back to the people who share their lives, which are used to build careers.

I accepted ethical paradigms aligned more closely with qualitative research than journalism. I was most compelled by the work of the historian Clifford (1988) whose critical examination of "the field" of ethnographers exposed to what extent their work has historically contributed to racist, imperial, colonialist, hegemonic, and repressive world systems. Because of this "crisis" of representation, much of contemporary ethnography rejects the "objective" stance, has a more complicated relationship with "the truth" and is mindful of the effects of centuries of ethnographic fieldwork and practices, and how ethnographic representations do the bidding of colonial, racist, imperial, and other repressive power structures (Clifford, 1988; Barz & Cooley, 1997).

The ethnomusicologist Kisliuk (1997) emphasizes reflexivity and descriptive narrative, sharing authority and authorship with informants, considered teachers, consultants, friends or all three. Kisliuk rejects seeing experience as either “my” story or “their” story “; instead, it is more helpful to see the ethnography of experience as a conversation within which learning is located, both during research and while writing.

The implications for this project on go-go are the following: I asked key respondents to review drafts of several chapters. I asked, and Richard agreed to let me use his real name and pseudonyms. I have also sent drafts to other respondents and sought their critical feedback. I showed a draft of Chapter 5, to Go-Go Nico, who corrected a few minor factual errors. I used nicknames for some ethnographic subjects and agreed to use a pseudonym to identify the transcriber of a live go-go recording. I also promised to provide copies of photos, transcripts, audio and video recordings to all my research partners, and plan to follow through.

Kisliuk (1997) and many other ethnomusicologists view reciprocity as an ethical mandate to avoid what they see as academic imperialism—an idea I find very compelling. In the name of ethnographic reciprocity, I am trying to get Nico grant funding to digitize his collection of thousands of go-go P.A.s. I also arranged for a friend to give him free legal advice for incorporating his company. I linked him with Kato, and provided one of the photos I took of him to use in a column he began writing in early 2007 wrote for [www.tmottgogo.com](http://www.tmottgogo.com) “Nico’s Niche.” I am also working with some museums and archives to establish a go-go collection and archival initiative, for which Nico is my primary partner and liaison.

I told respondents that I was a former *Post* writer and explained the goal of my dissertation project: to examine how go-go acts as a communication system, a “black CNN.” All of my research partners signed the university’s required Internal Review Board forms, which were approved under the “exempt” category in November 2005. Although very few people got back to me with actual feedback (and none fundamentally changed the project), giving them this option seemed to build trust. Surprisingly enough considering the wide range of fans I interviewed for this project, all of whom knew my history as a *Post* reporter, none of my respondents ever asked me at any point to put something I saw or recorded them saying “off the record.”

### **Researcher Gender, Ethnicity, and Class**

I have always brought my whole self to my journalistic and ethnographic work. I make connections with people on the scene as a young, black woman, an alumnus of black children’s theater, the wife of a hip-hop enthusiast, a DC public school mom on the PTA, Howard University and University of Maryland graduate, a resident of a predominantly black neighborhood in Washington, D.C. Sometimes, such as when interviewing working and middle-class go-go fans at the University of Maryland, many of whom shared my ethnicity (Caribbean) and socioeconomic class, my status was not strange, nor did it set me apart. In other cases, like on H Street Northeast at the go-go record store, and at go-gos, my diction, fashion, and other attributes made me different. I never changed my personal style or dialect to blend in, and always strived to be the same Natalie in whatever context. It is impossible to say



what the consequences of that were. However, I don't feel the goals of the project were compromised by my identity. I rarely brought up my status as a former *Washington Post* reporter in casual conversations especially at the clubs. However, invariably my research partners introduced me at go-gos as a reporter from the *Washington Post*. When I brought my DVD camcorder to record a Familiar Faces show in October 2006, lead talker Donnell Floyd told the crowd the *Washington Post* was here, so "no fights." He also at one point aborted a joke because "people were listening." As a journalist and ethnographer I have seen violence in other nighttime settings—typically alcohol-fueled dance-floor disputes that are quickly extinguished by club bouncers. This is one of the benefits of doing sustained anthropological work on the same subject as opposed to riding in on a journalistic parachute. I had the opportunity to return repeatedly, allowing me to both feel and appear less strange over time. I feel my sustained presence in the field has helped me to avoid what Fine et al (2003) described as coding for the bizarre, thus obscuring more relevant scholarly questions.

I felt my gender was an asset with respect to relating to male respondents. As Letherby wrote, female researchers in male-dominated settings can sometimes obtain rich data because of their perceived "invisibility". Letherby also notes that women fieldworkers have been portrayed as more accessible and communicative and less threatening than men, which facilitates fieldwork (Letherby, 2003, p.111). Letherby finds these perceptions regarding women fieldworkers sexist but I find them to be true and advantageous. I found most of the men I worked with on the go-go scene to be quite chivalrous and quite protective of me. When I came into a go-go one night

wearing bright red lipstick, one respondent groaned: “You gon’ make me fight for you up in there!” (That turned out not to be necessary.) Another time, I was recording a go-go show on DVD camcorder, and Al, the go-go fan who later transcribed a recording for me, hovered near me. He vowed to stay close to me in case anything “jumped off” –my physical safety was threatened, and walked me to my car. The next day, Al called me on my cell phone. He said he’d had a few drinks that night and wanted to apologize if he said or did anything “inappropriate.” (He did not.)

Despite all the violence associated with go-go, I never felt scared or physically threatened at shows or at the store. I always made connections with people on the go-go scene on a human level. Although I realize and accept that I am an outsider in the go-go scene, I never felt out of place.

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEWS**

Now that I have described a few of the ethical dilemmas of researching and presenting this dissertation, I will now describe how I gathered and analyzed the data for each chapter. There are different theoretical models ranging from cultural geography/cultural landscape analysis to ethnomusicology, to anthropology/life history research. I chose different methodological frames for each chapter with the goal of triangulation, which Hoggart et al describe as “employing complementary methods or data sources to circumvent the potential inadequacies of single data sources” (Hoggart et al, 2002, p. 312). Education theorists Cole and Knowles (2001) wrote that arts-informed ethnographic methods combine the rigor of scientific inquiry with the imaginative qualities of the humanities. These ethnographic methods are

uniquely and creatively responsive to representational forms of communication inherent in go-go. Thus, “the process of researching becomes creative and responsive and the representational form for communication embodies elements of various art forms photography, film and video, dance, music and multimedia installation (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10).

After this discussion, I will conclude this chapter with a short discussion of the study’s limitations.

#### **Chapter 4 “Club U: Cultural Geography of a Chocolate City”**

This chapter is a cultural landscape analysis of the public debate over the future of Club U, a go-go that took place in a DC government building from the early 1990s until 2005. Because of this particular go-go’s cultural geography, this chapter unpacks the notion of go-go as a literal, figurative, historic, and symbolic public sphere. In addition to taking place on public property, Club U was located at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, perhaps the most culturally and historically significant location in black Washington that was in the midst of gentrification when it ended. Over several months in 2005, the District of Columbia’s alcohol beverage control board conducted a series of hearings to decide whether to strip the go-go club of its liquor license following the stabbing death of a patron.

Social constructionists call for identifying “interpretive repertoires,” or culturally available linguistic resources that speakers use in building rhetoric moves (Burr, 2003, p. 167). Virtually any text or artifact that carries meaning may be analyzed. The aim is to identify the ideologies and power relations embedded in and

being reproduced through discourse, Burr wrote. The transcripts for the 2005 Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) board hearings related to the future of Club U is one such text.

Cultural geography is an analysis of the confluence of man-made and natural landscapes, which can be undertaken using a variety of qualitative methods (Shurmer-Smith, 2002; Hoggart et al, 2002). This method builds on the work of cultural geographers who examine a confluence of man-made and natural landscapes. Since the 1980s, a new kind of cultural geography has emerged that draws on theoretical traditions including feminist theory, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. One such cultural geography is David Wilson's (2005) book *Inventing Black-on-Black Violence: Discourse, Space, and Representation*, which uses statistics, ethnographies, anecdotal accounts, national reportage, memoirs, and critical geographical to explode the mythology about urban violence in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, the sociolinguist Gabriella Gahlia Modan's *Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity, and the Politics of Place*, also uses cultural geographical methods to examine the text and subtext of gentrification-related topics in a single neighborhood in Washington, D.C. (Modan, 2007).

The cultural theorist Korr's interdisciplinary model landscape model is particularly useful for research of primary materials such as the alcohol beverage board hearing. Korr's model describes cultural landscapes as a "cumulative record of the work of humans and nature in a certain place...which reflect the beliefs and values of the peoples in that place at different times" (Korr, 2001). Korr's analytic model is to include a description of historic and political dimensions, then a

discussion of the boundaries, a look at perceptions, explore the dynamic relationship, and finally, a cultural analysis.

This model has useful similarities with the schema used to build Habermas's blueprint for his structural analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas's schema included the "private realm" which included the civil society and home life, the "sphere of public authority" which included police and courts, and in the middle was the public sphere in the political realm, world of letters, and market of culture products (Habermas, 1962/1989, 30).

I reviewed roughly 1,000 pages of ABC board hearings. I coded, or highlighted comments from speakers at the hearings including business owners, politicians, activists, police, and go-go fans across Korr's five main categories described above. I also analyzed media coverage and commentary surrounding the debate in local newspapers, as well as relevant historical, ethnographic, and other scholarly sources to tease out additional dimensions of these five categories. In presenting the information, I attempted to allow various stakeholders to articulate for themselves the meanings embedded in this particular cultural landscape as a proxy for similar debates swirling around the entire go-go public sphere that was facing threats to its future due to gentrification.

## **Chapter 5 Race, Space, and Life History.**

Chapter 5 "Life History," focuses on Go-Go Nico, a major go-go collector and trader with thousands of live go-go recordings in his collection and an encyclopedic knowledge of go-go history. Here I use traditional participant-observation

ethnographic methods to examine the role of entrepreneurship as it intersects with cultural stewardship in the go-go public sphere. This chapter employs the “life history” research method described by Caughey (2006) and Frank (2000). The life history method reflects the assumption that the general can be best understood through the particular; individuals are windows into broader social and societal conditions (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Each person’s life history is a complex effort and worthy form of case study to deepen our understanding of culture—a system of meaning, interpretive framework and a language-concept system that a group uses to interpret experience and act in the world (Caughey 2006). Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that this method is useful to provide an insider’s view of a culture or era in history, by looking at an account of how someone enters a group and becomes socialized into that group and capable of meeting the normative expectations of that society. Life histories are particularly useful in studying cultural changes that have occurred over time (Marshall & Rossman 1999).

Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest participants be chosen for their membership in a particular culture who play significant roles in transmitting socially defined stocks of knowledge. Social orders taken for granted should be described and analyzed, assumptions revealed in rules and codes for conduct as well as in myths and rituals. Life histories should focus on experiences of an individual over time, and the cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individual’s unfolding story (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

I first met Nico in the summer of 2003, when I was working as a journalist and Nico was selling his go-go collection at the record store Mad T’s Music Box,

located at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets Northwest (across the street from Club U). (I provide more details of how we re-connected in the chapter itself.) Nico agreed to sign a copy of the Internal Review Board consent form. I also told him that I would provide copies of my transcripts and drafts for him to look at for factual and other errors. The formal research for this chapter began in February 2006 when Nico began working as a manager of the I Hip-Hop and Go-Go Factory, a record store on H Street, Northeast Washington. The data from this chapter were collected from February 2006 to March 2007, when Nico left the H Street store to take begin managing a go-go band and wholesale his collection at another music store in Iverson Mall in Prince George's County, Maryland.

Beginning with the life history method advanced by the anthropologist Caughey (2006), with whom I studied the “life history” method in a course at the University of Maryland's American Studies department, I spent an average one afternoon per week at the H Street store—sometimes more, sometimes, less. I conducted interviews with Nico when he was between customers. I generally sat behind the counter with Nico and greeted customers and other business owners along the strip, including the barber shop, beauty salon and itinerant entrepreneurs selling everything from hot dinners from their trucks, to homemade car fresheners. In casual conversations with customers, I would explain that I was a graduate student and former writer for the *Post*.

Following my training in ethnomusicological fieldwork, I also took several digital photos and recorded DVDs of Nico talking about the go-go scene. I also attended several go-go events with Nico, including his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in

October 2006 at a nightclub called the Phish Tea Café on H Street, which featured a performance by the band Familiar Faces. I recorded a DVD of the performance and an interview with Familiar Faces front man Donnell Floyd, a former longtime member of Rare Essence. I also recorded on DVD an exchange with Nico and another go-go researcher after the show. I brought my DVD camcorder other events with Nico, including the nightclub Takoma Station, where the Lissen Band was performing, and the WKYS 93.9 Go-Go Awards, which took place at the Daughters of the American Revolution's Constitution Hall in November 2006.

Many life history tools (such as interviews and observation) are common to traditional biography/historiography or even journalism. But cultural biography differs by including ethnographic materials based on prolonged, disciplined firsthand observations while participating in the research participant's life (Frank 2000). The role of life history researcher is to sift out meanings of these influences as they play out in the experiences of those whose lives are being explored. This includes a reciprocal crosscheck between life history and history, interviews with the participant, as well as field notes from participant-observation and artifacts.

Marshall & Rossman (1999) recommend examining the critical dimensions of the person's life, principal turning points, and the person's characteristic means of adaptation. Life histories typically contain a narrative about the individual research participant that also includes relevant contextual information including family heritage, racial background and ethnic cultures, socioeconomic status, community, religion gender, educational background of both researcher and researched (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Caughey, 2006).



## **Chapter 6 “1986: Drumming the News”**

This chapter aims to make the case that go-go recordings—thousands of which are in Nico’s collection—are news as well as historical artifacts, because they reveal cultural, fashion, language and dance scripts, as well as spotlighting key newsmakers years before the mainstream media. This chapter begins with a brief introduction that establishes the historical significance of this time of the recording, which took place in 1986. The rest of the chapter is presented as transcript of a single go-go recording, heavily footnoted with contextual information supplemented from news reports, scholarly literature, maps, and interviews. This is the chapter is not linearly presented in an attempt to privilege the music itself. In this case, the analysis is all located in the footnotes.

I recruited a research partner to transcribe the lyrics of this 1986 recording. There are several reasons for employing a transcriber. As I previously mentioned, I have a limited knowledge of many of the cultural history, as well as the geographic and cultural scripts embedded in go-go. I also did not attend the show, nor was I living in the Washington, D.C. area in 1986. The transcriber is a go-go fan that attended the 1986 show but wished to use an alias, so I’m identifying him by the name Al. He transcribed everything he heard on the recording, and notated other cultural scripts with special emphasis on the role of the Rare Essence lead talker. I also interviewed Al and other research partners about information about the people and places described by the lead talker, as well as consulted news sources to provide additional contextual information.

I then reviewed this transcript in a process described by the folklorist Jackson (1987) as “open coding.” I studied the transcript and interviews about the recording to footnote this recording with performance location, crews, shout-outs, dates, and other commentary that could be heard on the tape. I heavily footnoted the transcripts with maps and geographical information about shout-outs to crews, individuals, places, and neighborhoods from news, online sources, and ethnographic interviews.

The 1986 Rare Essence P.A. recording is a seminal go-go recording, according to my key research partners, most notably Nico and Kato. It was recorded sometime in early 1986 at a club in Northeast Washington, but two decades later it continues to be referenced and traded online. Live recordings done for commercial reasons are in some ways superior ethnographic records because they do not require cooperation of participants to gather them and are highly non-reactive, allowing the researcher to avoid affecting the flow of events as I did at the Familiar Faces show (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These data can be considered documents, archival records and physical evidence. This kind of sampling can be viewed as “opportunity” sampling that documents unanticipated or poorly understood phenomena as they occur, for later validation by researcher or participants.

Journalism historians Startt & Sloan note that whatever reflects human activity in the past can be part of the historic record. They note that oral sources of history have been useful tools for reconstructing the history of preliterate societies, and it has risen as an historical methodology in part due to interest in pre-colonial African societies of the 1960s (Startt & Sloan, 2003, p. 182). Extant objects created by people, some with no intention of preservation, include, relics, mementos, and an

array of things people used in work and leisure; these reveal something about past fashions and attitudes (Startt & Sloan, 2003).

Startt & Sloan say that while there is a major trend among historians to use oral evidence such as oral history, folklore, ballads, interviews, taped conversations or recordings, “do not in themselves constitute history.” They argue that there are problems with distortion and validity, and oral evidence must be used by “discerning historians and in conjunction with other sources” (Startt & Sloan, 2003, p. 183). As many critical race theorists have noted, this kind of suspicion toward oral sources is Eurocentric. When written sources are privileged over oral sources, it robs cultures of the ability to have final say over their own story. Critical race and postcolonial theory challenges these notions for both their racist implications as well as the nature of truth and reality (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Agawu, 2003).

This marginalization of oral traditions is consistent with the way many academics, historians, and journalists construct value, meaning, and “truth.” Mainstream news privileges hard news reports based on the functions of the state (Tuchman 1973). Collins (2000) notes that challenging such hegemonic prevailing epistemologies can be a powerful analytic tool to challenge not only dominant discourses, but also the very rules of the game.

## **Chapter 7 “LIVENESS: Drumming the News in 2006”**

This chapter aims to show how the news stories that go-go tells can be “read” in the live context. The chapter uses ethnomusicological research methods to explore how go-go delivers the news, i.e. how audience members communicate with their

bodies to the band and vice versa, and how the talker interacts with his environment, other band members, and the audience, as well as nonverbal communication.

Ethnomusicology is the study of musical cultures, ranging from musicology to anthropology, depending on the research goals (Cooley, 1997).

In Fall 2005 and Spring 2006, I took Field Methods in Ethnomusicology class; I collected and analyzed this data to satisfy course requirements. Ethnomusicological research typically takes the form of participant-observation, audio, photographic and/or video recordings of musical happenings, and interviews with people affiliated with a music scene. Ethnomusicology moves between the fields of musicology and anthropology, depending on the individual, but also draws from other disciplines, including folklore. The data that ethnomusicologists collect are filed as detailed field notes, memos, as well as musical and interview transcriptions.

For the purposes of the field methods in ethnomusicology class in fall 2005, I began attending rehearsals of the “go-go club,” which was formed by three University of Maryland-College Park undergraduates as a way to have practice space for their band, INI. A college-based go-go band is not the most common site for go-go; However, the location does not fundamentally change the cultural scripts employed by the band members, who ranged from middle to working class and had all been go-go fans their whole lives. The location of this “field” also provided a good illustration how go-go field covers virtually the entire Washington, D.C. area and is not limited to low-class, blue-collar music crowd described by Lornell & Stephenson.

Go-go is embraced across a wide spectrum of three generations of Washingtonians. For many in the generation that never knew a world without go-go,

that transcends class boundaries. Go-go shows have been known to take place at a network of private Washington area high schools, where black student groups sponsor go-go bands to play for Black History Month, prom, and other special occasions. This setting serves to complicate existing portrayals and representations of go-go as having solely a blue-collar clientele.

In addition to three University of Maryland students, the INI band lineup also included a changing number of local musicians not associated with the campus. They came together in different ways. (One had been recruited on a Metro train after being seen carrying a large instrument.) I recorded interviews with three band members who were Maryland students and thus easily accessible through campus. I informally chatted with another band member who did not attend the university, while giving him a ride to his home in nearby Mount Rainier, Maryland, on my way back to the District. Another band member was a student at Prince George's Community College, but I ran into him on campus visiting his girlfriend, who attended Maryland.

In February 2006, INI had its performance debut for Black Music week when a black campus group called A Woman's Worth sponsored a concert at Stamp Student Union. INI was the opening act for Backyard Band. I attended and recorded a DVD of this performance. The auspicious arrival of Backyard Band (and its lead talker Ghenghis) in my own scholarly backyard was a fateful and welcome development. As I noted earlier in the chapter, Ghenghis of Backyard Band is one of the most significant figures in go-go. Wherever he goes draws a large crowd, and the INI band members later told me that of the approximately 200 people filling the crowd at University of Maryland's Stamp Student Union, 60 to 70 percent came from

off-campus. The Backyard Band performance at the University of Maryland provided an opportunity to record a recent example of the dance, fashion, and cultural scripts embodied in a go-go performance.

The interviews with the INI Band members were mostly used as a crosscheck to what I had understood about go-go's cultural scripts. Thus a limited number of the INI band interviews were included in this chapter. The chapter begins with an ethnographic "thick description of the Backyard Band show advocated by Geertz's (1973) and epitomized by his widely cited description of a Balinese cockfight. I then spliced in information from ethnographic interviews from INI band, contextual information from Lornell & Stephenson and cultural theorists, news reports including my previous journalistic research and photos by *Post* photographer Marvin Joseph, as well as previously published reports, in addition to Lornell & Stephenson's work. I also included contextual information from published articles about the local dance styles and local clothing industry.

A variety of scholars have demonstrated how semiotics is a useful tool in reading the text of both the musical media channels and live performance (Thornton, 1995; Manuel, 1995; Dimitriadis, 2001). Hebdige (1987/1979) studied the styles of white working-class subcultures as a medium for subversive messages. Hebdige "read" their fashion—the dandyish style of the mods and teddy boys who often wore elaborate velvet Edwardian costumes, and the anti-fashion of the punks, as an expression of resistance against hegemony and a response to the encroachment of black West Indian immigrants into Great Britain. In it, he examined two warring representations of subcultures: on the street and in the mass media. Hebdige contrasts

mass cultural signs with the signs of subgroups who challenged hegemony covertly using “style” as a primary weapon. In this chapter, I view how local fashion and dance styles represent “semiotic guerrilla” warfare as a challenge to hegemonic constructions of black life in the Washington area.

### **Study Limitations**

In presenting this ethnography, I strove to strike a balance between local meanings and the larger scholarly conversation about the go-go public sphere. I have also aimed for clarity in presenting this information. Following Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) rather than composing a tightly organized analytic argument in which one idea leads logically and exclusively to the next, the chapters are presented as narrative “tales.” I wove specific analyses of discrete pieces of field note data into an overall story, which was loosely thematized to incorporate my field notes and analytic commentary.

I have limited this study to looking at some cultural, historical, political, and communicative aspects of go-go. Another fruitful inquiry would be to further delve into the economic infrastructure of go-go and the satellite network of black cultural entrepreneurs that support it. Recent studies of underground economic systems, including Levitt and Dubner’s (2005) *Freakonomics* and Venkatesh’s (2006) book, *Off The Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* point to new avenues for research on go-go. Venkatesh’s discussion of one underground economy in inner-city Chicago, a post-integration economy arose out of isolation and political and infrastructural blight sharing many attributes with Washington, D.C. Venkatesh

describes a range of off-the-books entrepreneurship from stay-at-home moms selling chicken dinners, to expansive crime rings. Venkatesh provided anonymity for all his research partners and did not disclose the exact location in Chicago where he did his ethnography, allowing him to include precise financial data. In a way, this dissertation might be a useful way to look at the cultural output of such economic realities in U.S. urban centers. However, more work on the topic of the go-go economy itself would be fruitful.

Another limitation involves gender issues in my sample. I have worked with a number of members of the go-go community, chosen for a range of reasons, including access and general knowledge of the history of go-go as a form of communication, many of whom are women. However, go-go is a male-dominated genre, dominating the ranks of artists, managers, security companies, club owners, newsletter editors, music sellers, and writers (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). Like the field of journalism news anchor, go-go talker role is constructed as somewhat of a macho, testosterone-laden enterprise. Women have rarely played the role of the lead go-go talkers who preside over the go-go. Much like the voices in go-go itself, the voices of women are muted in this study. Future studies of the role of gender in go-go would be quite fruitful. However, one thing to recall is that my own reflexive presence in the study will provide somewhat of a counterweight to the heavy masculine presence of the informants and on the data itself. As I just described in detail, I have my own history and positioning with go-go that is a part of this study.

As Hebdige (1979/1987) wrote, even “sympathetic” readings of subordinate cultures by academics are often greeted by cultural groups with just as much



indifference and contempt as the hostile reception by the courts and the press. “In this respect to get the point is, in a way to miss the point” (p. 139). Hurston (1935) similarly noted a resistance to black culture being aired and dissected outside the black community. At the direction of her academic advisor at Barnard College, the noted anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston gathered folk material from respondents in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. She speculated on the reasons for the resistance to her academic inquiries in the introduction for *Mules and Men*, the classic book of black folklore:

[Black people] do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” we smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity with a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

The theory behind our tactics? “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside of my door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind.” (Hurston, 1935/1990, p. 2-3)

Finally, this analysis is offered with the understanding that I do not speak for go-go—which does fine speaking for itself. I do not expect these methods to “expose” the reality of go-go, which is far more rich and nuanced than can be explored in a single study. Nor do I expect the hand wringing I’ve described in this chapter to earn me membership in or validation from the go-go community, or for members to reconsider my status as The Enemy. This methodological approach simply aims to produce a tapestry of voices and perspectives on how go-go functions as a public sphere. As Hoggart, et al (2002) note, this kind of triangulation is not a strategy to

win validation, but an *alternative* to validation. This qualitative approach provides a snapshot of the complexities and contradictions of this particular public sphere that transcends the police blotter. As Olesen (2003) wrote of the ideal feminist research, my hope is these methods will produce new insights about how societal and institutional forces mesh with human activity, insights that have the potential to plant news seeds for further research, praxis, and policy.

## Chapter 3: Call & Response

*Evolution, from the past to the present. That's where this whole thing comes from, Africa. Drums was used to talk from tribe to tribe. They would use the drum to talk to each other. And call & response and that whole thing. So that's basically the foundation of go-go...[On a visit to West Africa] I saw a lot of rhythmic congas and drums. A lot of call & response. They just don't call it 'go-go.'*

--Donnell Floyd of Familiar Faces (Personal communication, October 2006)

### OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 briefly discussed the role of music in Habermas's (1962/1991) conceptualization of the public sphere in the context of feudal and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. This sphere later reached its pinnacle with the rise of coffee-house culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and eventually gave way to the realm of the mass media. In Habermas's brief treatment of music, he described how the royals used music as a display of power to bolster their claim of authority. In this chapter, I review the literature that details the evolution of a public sphere in a non-Western tradition in which the role of music is central, foundational, and enduring. The origins of these traditions are in West Africa, spread westward and endured over time as the public sphere entered the realm of mass media.

Call & response is a fundamental technique that recurs frequently within the live go-go context. This chapter will explore the more transcendental role this expressive element plays within African-derived cultures. It is one of a group of expressive elements appear and reappear throughout the African Diaspora across time, geography, and context. Through a trans-Atlantic call & response between

Africa, the Americas and Europe, these communicative traditions have survived centuries of trauma, holocaust, slavery, and dislocation with remarkable resiliency. As old forms die out, new combinations of the same components appear in their place. As folklorist Zora Neale Hurston said of black cultural traditions, they are “being made and forgotten each day” (Anderson, 2001, p.199). Monson (1999) wrote that the aesthetic riffs, rhythm, and repetition that are common to music across the African Diaspora help to articulate the idea that sound structure is an expression of social structure—an idea invented and reinvented in all black music to create a shared musical experience and identity. As Agawu notes, “in the last one hundred years, some aspects of tradition have remained intact, some have even intensified their authenticity, while others have metamorphosed into new traditions” (Agawu, 2003, p.5).

Acknowledging certain recurring tropes in historical continuum of African-derived communication also means carefully avoiding essentialist reasoning and romanticism—not to mention the theoretical booby traps related to racial authenticity. Centuries of colonization, trade, and immigration on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean preclude the existence of a pristine, pure African essence, undiluted and uncontaminated by outside cultural influences (Gilroy, 1993; Agawu, 2003; Roach, 1996). Whether black vernacular cultures are practiced on the vast, culturally diverse continent itself or points West, they are by nature “irreducibly mixed, hybrid, syncretic, in-between, impure” (Agawu, 2003).

I nevertheless agree with Alexander (1995) that even in the anti-essentialist, post-identity moment, there is still place for a bottom line: “Different groups possess

sometimes-subconscious collective memories, which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience” (p.84). By any measure, we are talking about exceedingly buoyant communication forms.

In this chapter, I will discuss five elements common to these African-derived communicative traditions, including: Music as place, the male “griot” figure, rhythm and repetition, specific textual themes (including “news”), and finally, evolving media/expressive containers. I will then close this chapter with a brief discussion of how each of these elements have manifested in the three-decade history of go-go.

### **Music as Place**

In a variety of contexts and historical moments, music has been a dominant cultural apparatus used to create community across the African Diaspora. The critical role of music in all aspects of African life historically has been well documented (Nketia, 1974; Bebey, 1969; Chernoff, 1997). In traditional West African cultures, a setting is rarely dedicated solely to music. Instead music happens in any location suitable for collective activity Nketia (1974). Through movement, clothing, and instruments such as the “talking drums,” concerts function as communicative occasions. Agawu noted that Nketia’s and Bebey’s were among the first and most influential African-authored surveys by musician-scholars, but have recently been criticized as romantic and uncritical. Agawu wrote that African music should be viewed as both a contemplative *and* functional art. Agawu argues that both iconic and symbolic modes of signification are at work in using musical instruments such as

African “talking drums,” for instance, as a communication medium. In contemporary African highlife music, song texts draw from conversations in buses, bars, churches, schools, the streets, etc. “Composers invoke aspects of tradition to code a series of rejections on the modern African experience.... Taken as a whole, these imaginatively composed texts provide a window onto the contemporary African mind” (Agawu, 2003, p.15).

The central role of music in black culture also survived the Middle Passage in which African slaves were transported to the Americas. As Neal (1999) wrote, one of the enduring mysteries is the many manifestations and updated roles of West African talking drums and their surrogates in the construction of a black public sphere in the United States. Dubois’ (1903) writings about slave “sorrow songs” revealed the role of music as a repository and historical archive of social memory. Baker (1995) wrote that the 1871 tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a group of students based at the historically black Fisk University, offered international audiences a “black counter-authority of interpretation....[The Fisk singers] materialized in sound, performance, and musical transcription a disembodied idea of statehood” (p.14).

Neal (1999) argued that the black popular music tradition has served as a primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the black experience, creating a black public sphere in the historical period following slavery and beyond in which blacks were barred from public accommodations such as parks, restaurants, meeting halls, libraries (p.5). Neal wrote that a loose network of black nightclubs, juke joints and after-hours clubs was “invaluable for the creation of common aesthetic and cultural sensibilities among the African-American Diaspora” (Neal, 1999, p.30).

Kelley (1994) agreed that bars, dance halls, blues clubs, barber shops, beauty salons, and street corners are a window into “the private worlds of black working people were thoughts, dreams, and actions that were otherwise choked back in public could find expression” (p.44).

Collins (2000) wrote that African-derived communication patterns maintain the integrity of the individual and his or her personal voice, but do so in the context of group activity (p.105). Davis (1998) noted that black music genres in the U.S. such as blues, for example, do not distinguish between a public and private, the personal and the political. Davis’s study of the song texts of blues women revealed the ways that the blues transformed collective memories of slavery into commentary on working-class black life. In this way, Davis argued that black oral culture plays an equivalent function to print media in white culture, but more. The musical occasions centered around the blues create a cultural space that united the community, and functioned as a cultural mediator for taboo topics such as domestic violence. Much like a religious service, the blues’ use of call and spontaneous audience response required a kind of public dialogue, Davis wrote.

Neal (1999) charted the transformation of the music-mediated black public sphere of the “chitlin’ circuit” that was eventually disrupted by national political movements such as World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. Black soldiers from World War II and the desegregation of post-Civil Rights movement dispersed many traditional urban and rural black public spheres. This altered the relationship of black popular music and its primary constituency (Neal, 1999). Records and radio began to fill the void (Barlow, 1999). Beginning in the late 1940s, a new generation

of black “personality jocks” helped to build a black radio market from whole cloth through a playful style of radio announcing based on the use of many elements of the African and African American oral tradition such as common black urban street slang, “playing the dozens,” rhyme, and stories (Barlow, 1999). A wide variety of black vernacular forms were mediated in updated technologies, as I will discuss shortly.

### **Male “Griot” Figure**

Many African-derived expressive forms are guided by a male figure that is the primary messenger of news and information. Gates (1988) wrote that this role has roots in the ancient Yoruba trickster figure called Esu-Elegbara, a mythical figure that figures prominently in the music of Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuban, Haiti, and New Orleans. This folkloric figure of Esu survived the Middle Passage and his presence and powers only increased after the trip across the Atlantic. Gates (1988) notes that Esu’s role of messenger transcends that of delivery boy, and integrates the entire whole, both “interpreter” and “linguist” (p. 38).

The male musical leader in West African culture is also referred to as the “griot,” a professional musician, a troubadour who goes from village to village, peddling stories and collecting new ones. The griot knows all the town gossip and historical events, serving as a living archive of his people’s traditions (Bebey, 1969; Nketia, 1974). This description of the traditional West African griot is analogous to Waterman’s description of contemporary Nigerian juju “band captains.” The band captain structure also includes a second or third person in command and subordinates



are allowed to lead the band on certain occasions. In many African-derived musical forms, the role of the griot vies with that of the drummer, also typically male, for centrality and dominance.

The drummer similarly must have a command of oral literature, history, and the by-names and praise names of each person so he can chant them during the African music performance (Bebey, 1969; Nketia, 1974). As Echeruo (1977) describes Victorian-era Lagos, Nigeria, drummers were entrusted with the task of maintaining the historical record. As Smith (2003) wrote, in hip-hop, Esu/griot figure appears as the emcee or rapper. The history-keeping role of the drummer is played by the deejay, who must have a command of an archive of musical recordings to draw from in the sampling process.

Neal (1999) wrote that the black public sphere is largely a male-dominated realm. With several highly notable exceptions, such as Davis's (1998) work on blues singers and Rose's (1994) work on female hip-hop emcees suggest that the role of women has been under explored in the scholarly literature of black music.

Hagedorn's study of Cuban Santeria may provide one explanation for the exclusion of women in these musical public spheres. First in her apprenticeship in learning the *bata* drum, Hagedorn (2001) defied *Santeria* drumming tradition that largely excludes women. When she did gain the confidence of a teacher, she was told she was not allowed to play the drum while she was on her menstrual cycle. The drummers were afraid of female reproductive power.

## **Rhythm and Repetition**

The presence, and often dominance, of drums characterizes most African-derived expressive forms, and are completely avoidable in the present study. A variety of scholars have discussed the “talking drum” which mimics the sounds of human speech, telegraphs messages, and serves as a living historical document (Bebey, 1969; Mushengyezi, 2003; Chernoff, 1997). Agawu (2003) may be correct to point out that the privileging of rhythm in portrayals of African music has been sensationalized overstated by musicologists. However, I will briefly address its communicative aspects.

The African music scholar Mushengyezi (2003) wrote the nonverbal expression through “talking” drums represents a type of mediation that requires its own kind of literacy, program, or code sometimes called “oracy.” These messages are “decoded” via various sounds coming from drums and horns by those who have spent their lives becoming versed in this form of communication. Indigenous African media forms such as dance, music, drama, drums, horns, village criers, orators, and storytellers continue to be effective ways in contemporary Uganda, for instance, for disseminating information in rural societies where the population tends to be predominantly ‘orate’ or ‘oralate’ rather than literate (Mushengyezi, 2003).

Rose (1994) wrote that in hip-hop, the role of the drum was assumed by deejays and producers who create a similar degree of rhythmic complexity, repetition, and subtle variations using bass frequencies and breaks in pitch and time from the records they sample. Rap producers use sampling to repeat and reconfigure existing composition to highlight patterns via breaks and points of musical rupture, creating

rhythm. Rose argues that rap's orality is closely informed by the technology that produces it. Call & response are also elements of live and recorded hip-hop, and "oral logic" that Rose describes as a "complex fusion of orality and postmodern technology" (Rose, 1994, p.85).

Musical repetition is also a critical element in musical communication. Bebey (1969) wrote that in addition to the reuse of isolated musical phrases, the repetition of whole units or groups of units is common to traditional West African music. Nketia (1974) wrote that these riffs appear in the form of call & response both in dance, and verbally, during the traditional African performance. Nketia (1974) wrote that speech and song may alternate within the same piece: a song may begin with a spoken call & response section, followed by a section in which the singing voice is used, or vice versa. Smith (2003) noted similar common jazz phrasings and in hip-hop such repetitions may serve to emphasize the singer's point, or give him time to think of something new to say.

To Rose, the voice of the hip-hop emcee is also a rhythmic element, which Nketia (1974) similarly found in traditional African music. "The most far-reaching influence is exerted by the verbal texts to which songs are set. African traditions deliberately treat songs as though they were speech utterances...the use of rapid delivery of texts, explosive sounds or special interjections, vocal grunts, and even the whisper is not uncommon" (Nketia, 1974, p.177-178).

## **Textual Themes**

Several recurring narrative themes can be found in black vernacular music forms, including news (current happenings and opinions), naming/boasting, and the twin themes of freedom and death.

Current events and commentary are encoded in a variety of African traditional and contemporary expressive texts (Waterman, 1990, p.20). Nketia (1974) noted that among the Yoruba, hunters' descriptions of episodes from their experience in the forest or recitation of poetry about nature or objects of nature evolved into song. In 1950s South Africa, Allen (1990) showed singers making studio recordings literally ripped from the latest headlines, gossip, and controversies. Allen notes that the ability of coded, cryptic lyrics to accommodate multiple interpretations is useful in a repressive political climate, allowing critiques of the dominant public discourse in the form of jokes, songs or gestures whose interpretations can be reinforced in a performance context. Waterman (1990) revealed how juju song texts reflected the ebb and flow of the Nigerian oil economy. Sensitive political developments were continuously encoded in popular juju song texts, making traditional drummers and singers in effect the "local newspapers and propaganda leaflets" (Waterman, 1990, p.31).

In American black vernacular culture, the practice of singing the news also thrived, with black religious and secular music that transformed individual emotions into collective responses to adversity. Davis's (1998) textual analysis of women's blues songs reveals a patchwork social history of black Americans during the decades following emancipation with previously unrecognized social content and political

dimensions. Davis notes, for example, that Bessie Smith's "Poor Man's Blues" preceded the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression, and her "Backwater Blues" 1927 release coincided with the most catastrophic floods in Mississippi River history when 600,000, more than half of whom were black, lost their homes. Davis notes that the blues spirit constantly contests the borders between "reality and art," as well as the "reality-oriented" dimensions of blues performance whose secret allusions made them accessible to working class audiences. Oakley (1976) notes that blues music carries on slavery traditions in which humor, satire, and irony are indirect means of protest in ways that ensure their targets would misunderstand the intended meaning.

Hip-hop language, dance, and music form oppositional transcripts of the unofficial truths that comprise communal bases of knowledge about social conditions (Chang, 2005; George, 1998; Rose, 1994). Kelley (1994) writes that gangsta rappers write lyrics intended to convey a sense of social realism, a kind of "street ethnography" or "street journalism" of racist institutions and social practices often told in first person. Chuck D, also known as Carlton Ridenhour, explained this conception of rap music as news:

We worked to hijack the media and put it in our own form. That's originally how we came out. Initially, Rap was America's informal CNN because when Rap records came out, somebody far away could listen to a Rap record because it uses so many descriptive words and get a visual picture from what was being said. So a person that was coming up in Oakland would listen to a record from New York and get a visualization of what New York was all about. When rappers came out from Oakland and Los Angeles and they were visual with their words, people all over could get informed about black life in those areas without checking the news. Every time we checked for ourselves on the news they were locking us up anyway, so the interpretation

coming from Rap was a lot clearer. That's why I call Rap the Black CNN. (Ridenhour & Jah, 1997, p. 252)

Rose notes that identity and location are the primary themes in hip-hop. As Rose states, "Rappers' emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated" (Rose, 1994, p. 11). Neal (1999) notes that hip-hop comes out of the Jamaican toast tradition, representative of a concerted effort by young urban blacks to use mass-culture to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured community.

This also speaks to another common black vernacular theme, naming, both of individuals and places. According to Davis (1998) the blues preserve and transform the West African philosophical centrality of cultural traditions, the process of *nommo*—naming things, forces, and modes—is a mean of establishing control over the object of the naming process. Cultural theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Fanon (1967) say this naming process is at the heart of the postcolonial quest to be recognized and heard. Nketia notes that many traditional African songs' use of allusions and poetic images conceived in the style of proverbs exploit the evocative power of names and by-names. Nketia notes that a large part of the repertoire of Akan song texts consist of eulogies, praise songs, or boasting songs that references exploits of ancestor kings and the names of those defeated or captured in battle. These recitals are often punctuated with talking drums and trumpets that created musical "texts" related to the historical chant, or praise the reigning monarch (Nketia, 1974; Chernoff, 1997).

Waterman (1990) notes that the role of juju as a form of praise music anchors it firmly in the social dynamics of local communities, where specific personalities, institutions, and events form the basis for lyric compositions during live performances. Sometimes, in order to praise a juju patron, one must denigrate his enemies. Feuds between juju stars were the subject of public gossip and are sometimes extended over a series of recordings. Much like hip-hop “beefs” which run the course of several albums, juju fans would buy the entire sequence of discs to keep up with the feud.

Freedom and death are recurring themes in much of black vernacular. In his examination of New Orleans musical traditions such as Mardi Gras and jazz funerals, English scholar Roach (1996) described how participants used “orature” as a technique to remember the past and the re-imagine the future. By invoking the spirits in the music, audience and musicians are recreating or reliving the members of the community that have moved on to the spiritual world, transforming their bodies into “performed effigies.” This allows ancestors to live on through a specially nominated medium or surrogate such as actors, dancers, priests, street maskers, statesmen, celebrities, freaks, and children (Roach, 1996).

To Roach, these rituals provide an occasion to mark and question the boundaries of circum-Atlantic identities, offering a genealogy of past transgressions, by listening, speaking, and improvising a collective memory. Thus the medium of sound can also function as a channel between the past and the future, life and death. Delivered by living messengers, this repetition allows re-creation and restoration: “Text may obscure what performance tends

to reveal: memory challenges history in the construction of circum-Atlantic cultures, and it revises the yet unwritten epic of their fabulous cocreation” (Roach, 1996, p. 286).

Gilroy (1995) says the preoccupation of twin themes of death and freedom run through black vernacular culture reflecting the double-meaning Negro spirituals sung by slaves. “Amidst the terror of slavery, where bodily and spiritual freedoms were readily distinguished along lines suggested by Christianity—if not African cosmology—death was often understood as an escape” (Gilroy, 1995, p. 69).

The freedom/death paradox is just one of many that abound in black vernacular cultures where meaning is manipulated and transformed—often into its opposite in the performance setting. As Davis notes of the blues, the literal, semantic level of blues lyrics is often an invitation to misreading.

### **Evolving Media/ Expressive Containers**

I will briefly expand on the discussion in Chapter 1 on evolution of the American urban black public sphere as a physical place to one located in the realm of mass media. I will return to the case of go-go in Washington, D.C. shortly. However, it is important to note that go-go emerged simultaneously with this shift in the black public sphere that took place nationally.

As Neal (1999) and Barlow (1999) noted, the seismic demographic shifts caused by the return of World War II veterans, followed by the Civil Rights Movement shifted the location of the black public sphere from a physical place i.e.



barber shops, Chitlin' Circuit venues, and privately owned clubs to the realm of mass media (Neal, 1999).

Neal wrote that as black middle class families relocated beyond the margins of urban centers and rural South, this pattern threatened historic communal relations inherent to black public life. Musicians such as George Clinton of Parliament used recordings like "Chocolate City" to critique black middle-class flight from the inner city neighborhoods and institutions in the wake of desegregation and suburbanization in the 1960s and 1970s (Neal, 1999). Recordings by contemporary artists such as Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, Donnie Hathaway and Cannonball Adderly served as renewed public spaces of communal sharing by speaking to the times and the black people who lived in them (Neal, 1999).

Black radio also stepped up to fill the void of creating a musical public sphere, another example of how the music served as a vehicle for news. Black deejays were instrumental in popularizing the new soul music genre, and they were responsible for setting up the radio "grapevine" on which civil rights information circulated in the black community (Barlow, 1999). Baker noted that the ingenious mass media strategy of the Civil Rights Movement also spoke directly to a rurally oriented black community that transmitted wisdom through oral/aural means epitomized by Rev. Martin Luther King's request to be eulogized as a "drum major for justice" (Baker, 1995, p. 21).

Barlow (1999) argued that soul music became a race-coded soundtrack for the assault on Jim Crow, and "black appeal" radio became an important means of spreading the civil rights message. As Radio shifted from national product to local

advertising vehicle, the black market was developed in various cities. Thus black recording industry and radio industry allowed for the distribution of black expression, becoming a primary sociocultural apparatus for black counter narratives (Barlow, 1999).

The emergence in the mid-1970s of hip-hop represented a new phase in the evolution of black expressive forms. At its birth in the early 1970s, hip-hop was a community based art form and “Black CNN” that generated news via turntables, microphones and sound systems (George, 1998; Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994, Ridenhour & Jah, 1997). Within its first decade, hip-hop moved out of its birthplace of the Bronx through a global music distribution network. By the late 1980s there was a shift in the way hip-hop was produced, delivered and experienced by fans. Hip-hop artists no longer composed music in front of crowds, but alone in a studio. The messages delivered via hip-hop were received in more solitary settings, such as cars, home stereos and mobile stereos (Dimitriadis, 1996).

Groups such as Public Enemy attempted to link the black community through postmodern media technology. “Rap could become an idiom which could create solidarities beyond the boundary of face-to-face communication,” Dimitriadis (1996) wrote. Rap music took on the role as black news network as the music became less party-oriented and more narrative-based. Through music videos, hip-hop artists attempted to create a sense of realism in the realm of the mass media. Although George lamented that music videos “killed the house-rocking mic” (George, 1998, p.111), this was also a key element in helping transport hip-hop beyond its New York City neighborhoods.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as new black musical forms were being innovated, a global corporate structure was quickly adapted to sign the artists and spread their music beyond its geographic roots. Corporations, notably, London-based Island Records, enjoyed a degree of success with reggae, juju and hip-hop music, creating a kind of black vernacular gold rush. Multimedia formats helped to popularize black expressive forms around the world. The 1972 film *The Harder they Come*, which featured reggae artists, helped to lay the foundation for the genre's international crossover commercial success. Island Records founder Chris Blackwell had monumental success with Bob Marley. Seeking to build on that success, in 1982, Chris Blackwell signed King Sunny Ade, the best-known juju musician outside of Nigeria (Waterman, 1990). Similar film vehicles for hip-hop, including *Wild Style*, *Breakin'*, and *Beat Street* emerged in the early 1980s, along with a steady stream of cable music videos, set the stage for hip-hop's international success (Chang, 2005, 192).

With the rise of recordings and the music video, the core black vernacular expressive elements, including dialogue and call & response unique to African-derived expressive forms were compromised (Gilroy, 1995). Gilroy noted that since video high-tech effects could not be faithfully reproduced in the live context, the foundational authority of the performance event had been eroded. Gilroy added that what was originally "street culture" had been replaced with "jeep culture" where cars were the equivalents of the Walkman. Gilroy bemoaned this "sad process of social privatization." (Gilroy, 1995, p. 64); likewise, George (1998) noted that "the saddest

consequence of hip hop video is that its prominence has removed live performance from the center of its aesthetic” (p. 111).

There are, however, black expressive forms that resisted this process of privatization, remaining community-based expressive forms that place the live performance tradition at the center. One example is Nigerian juju music. Waterman (1990) notes that in 1984, Island Records dropped juju superstar King Sunny Ade due to poor record sales. Juju music, however, remained an important nexus in city of Ibadan’s nighttime economic structure. The musical culture was able to survive in part due to its symbiotic relationship with, and function of chronicling the ebb and flow of local players the Nigerian oil industry. In Ibadan, the Nigerian capital city, live juju music remained the privileged mode of symbolic and economic transaction (Waterman, 1990).

Across the Atlantic, in another national capital city, another live music scene survived and resisted commoditization as well.

### **Go-Go Against the Grain**

When I first started you had bands all over the city. All the bands were doing Top-40s. We were doing top-40s, 25 and 30 songs a night. I just had this feeling, that some of that old spiritual church music that we used to play in my church when I was a little boy. Real fast, you know what I’m saying? I heard Grover Washington come out with “Mr. Magic.” He had that beat, only it was slower, groovy. It was slower; it wasn’t hyped up like church music. I said, “they used to play that at my church!” So I decided to try it and started playing “Mr. Magic.” From there, we started dropping down into the percussion. The same feeling I had with Los Latinos, I took the same percussion with me. So we started dropping that percussion and we had other ideas. The audience liked it. They liked the call & response. They liked the participation. You know, the band participating with the audience. And

I was searching for a sound for the town. Nobody else came up with nothing...

Go-Go creator Chuck Brown, "Chuck Town" intro, to the album "We're About the Business." Raw Venture Records. Released April 24, 2007.

Lornell & Stephenson put 1976 as the year go-go really emerged under the creation of Chuck Brown, known as the "Godfather of Go-Go." A North Carolina native who moved to Washington as a child, Brown was playing in an R&B Top-40 band when he started experiment with some Afro-Latin rhythms he had picked up working as a guitarist with the Los Latinos, a Caribbean-influenced Top-40 band. Brown cites his other primary influence as the black church. To compete with disco, Brown played and talked to the audience accompanied by his distinctive beat, keeping the crowd engaged and bodies moving on the dance floor. This beat is constructed through a variety of percussive elements, including congas, roto-toms, timbales, Ghanaian hand drum and cowbells from Africa via South America. Aesthetic parallels abound between go-go and Pentecostal services, including long, extended hours with no predetermined end point; blurred demarcation between performers and audience (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). There are also aesthetic similarities to juju, calypso, and soca. Like New Orleans brass bands, go-go is locally based, black, male-dominated, nocturnal and feature heavy interaction between the band and audience (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001).

### **Go-Go Music as Place**

Natalie: What is the purpose of go-go?

Donnell Floyd: I think it's to entertain the people. Make the people feel good. Have a good party. A lot of times people come from the underbellies of the city. A lot of times people come from the upper crusts of the city. We just like to bring everybody together. In one great big melting pot and enjoy each other's company.

--(Personal communication, October 2006) with Donnell Floyd, former Rare Essence saxophonist and Familiar Faces lead talker.

Lornell & Stephenson (2001) wrote that go-go musicians unite the black community by providing a forum—a physical place—to speak about their everyday experiences. At a go-go, there is very little distinction between the audience and the band and there is an ongoing dialogue with give-and-take and call & response helping to establish intimacy. As I mentioned previously, the informal nature of go-gos makes it virtually impossible to quantify exactly how often they occur in the Washington Metropolitan area. Botch, a 21-year-old go-go fan and band member (Personal communication, November 2005) estimated that an average of six to seven go-gos take place on weekdays and as many as 16 different performances on Friday and Saturday nights, ranging from school cafeterias to nightclubs. Go-Go Nico, a research partner discussed at length in Chapter 5, “Life History,” estimates that at the height of go-go's popularity in the mid 1980s, there were 5-7 different shows at clubs on each weekday and 10-15 on each weekend night. In 2007, Nico estimated there were 3-5 go-gos operating in various venues during weekdays, and 10 different shows on Friday and Saturday nights (Personal communication, May 2007). Go-go bands are also frequently hired to perform at private events at private schools and public

schools, often sponsored by black student groups. Top go-go bands perform 5 to 6 days per week—all in the Washington, D.C. area. Go-go's live economy is built on an ever-shifting assemblage of schools, clubs, parks, fire halls, that have more in common with the jukes, Chitlin' Circuit venues of days past than the global postmodern mass medium that black music, and especially hip-hop, have become.

Go-gos are deeply integrated into local black private and public institutions: private nightclubs and the high school marching band tradition in Washington, D.C. public schools (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). These helped provide a steady supply of drum, horn, and trumpet players from all parts of the city who could marry movement with music in the black marching band tradition. Many neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. and neighboring Prince George's County, Maryland have a go-go band as their ambassador. For many young black Washingtonians and citizens of Prince George's County, go-go bands are the most visible and public manifestations of black youth culture (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001).

Like the blues and Nigerian juju, go-go also wears the “mantel of low-class or blue-collar music” although as go-go artist Donnell Floyd noted, it does speak to virtually every social class within the black community, the “underbelly” and the “upper crust.”

### **Go-Go's Male “Griot” Figure**

In go-go, the “lead talkers”—descendants of the West African griot and praise singers, provide commentary about life in the District of Columbia and beyond. Much like juju band captains who sometimes pass off leadership to second and third in

command, a strict hierarchy is enforced: Lead talker or “first mike,” then “second mic,” then all the rest of the band members and with a critical role to the conga player, the ultimate aesthetic element that defines go-go. Lornell & Stephenson noted a dearth of female energy in go-go, in performance, promotion, and management. Although the newer crop of bands maintains at least one female vocalist, Lornell & Stephenson (2001) are correct in paraphrasing James Brown, “go-go is a man’s world” (p. 18)

### **Go-Go Rhythm and Repetition**

The Beat distinguishes go-go’s rhythmic drive, complex interlocking rhythms are essential to present-day Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Senegal (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). Just as West African juju was influenced by immigration from Brazil (Waterman, 1990), go-go was influenced by Latino immigration to Washington, D.C. Chuck Brown’s exposure to Latin rhythms playing with the Top-40 band, Los Latinos. Much like Cuban Santeria, these expressive forms in go-go have a dual sacred and secular function and incorporates call & response (Hagedorn, 2001).

The role of the drum in go-go music is considerably traditional, to say the least. Contemporary go-go producer Reo Edwards told the author Chang (2005) about an incident that reflected the roll of the drums in go-go culture. “I was talking to a go-go songwriter one time. I said, ‘Man, you need a verse here.’ The guy said ‘The rototom’s talking! Hear the rototom?’ Swear to God, he said the rototom was telling the story. ‘Can’t put no verse there, the rototom telling the story’” (p. 409).



## **Go-Go Textual Themes**

Go-go mirrors its diasporic cousins in emphasizing several recurring narrative themes, including “news” (current happenings and opinions,) naming/boasting, and the twin themes of freedom and death. These textual themes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 and 7; however, I will now provide a brief summary.

The content of the news told in contemporary go-go music is aggressively zoned and coded toward the DC audience, block by block. The chants, the neighborhoods, the geographical intricacies of black Washington are detailed throughout the course of a go-go performance through shout-outs also common to hip-hop and influenced by Caribbean traditions. The lead talker conducts the roll call. Because the roll call is so much an integral part of contemporary go-go texts, go-go can be considered a form of praise music. Like juju, lead talkers are band captains whose job is to find out who is in the audience so they can be put on display, literally naming them as a way of paying homage. Unlike juju band captains, who are “sprayed” or financially rewarded by the people they put on display, go-go lead talkers are not paid directly. They are instead rewarded by receipts at the door, and admission fees that rise dramatically over the course of the night.

“The pocket,” a groove in performance, provides a critical juncture for social commentary about events of local and international significance, and being Washington, D.C., sometimes both. Like juju bands of Nigeria, the go-go bands of the District of Columbia encode the primary economic and social movements experienced in that region. In Nigeria, that happened to be the booming oil economy. In 1980s Washington, D.C., it was a booming and violent drug economy and the

emergence of a prosperous black middle class. People may be praised in life and also, frequently after their untimely deaths, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, “Liveness.”

Current events that fly largely under the mainstream media radar are encoded in go-go song texts: In 2004, when the go-go clothing industry faced a threat from a Korean interloper poised to take over their industry, they turned to the go-go “talkers” to spread the word of their plight during shows (Hopkinson, 2004). In 2003, when the District of Columbia health officials sought to encourage teens to be tested for HIV, they turned to members of the go-go community, who proved to be extremely effective in persuading youth to be tested (Hopkinson, 2003). This use of cultural art forms as “folk media” has several parallels to similarly constructed cultural communications systems in rural Africa. There, government and development groups have employed the “folk media,” “oramedia,” or “talking” drum to be effective in HIV prevention efforts (Mushengyezi, 2003).

### **Go-Go’s Evolving Media/Expressive Containers**

Go-go plays a similar role in the construction of life in black Washington, D.C. as its diasporic cousins. However, it stands in sharp contrast to other genres such as jazz, blues, rhythm & blues, and hip-hop, which have felt the effects of commoditization, taking them out of the black public sphere and into one that is more accessible to others. At its essence, go-go must be experienced live, where its own performance rules and scripts are known, understood, and adhered to by the musicians and fans alike (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). Although go-go music is

rarely scored and never tightly scripted or controlled, it has kept up with most technological innovations, from P.A. cassettes to CD, to DVD, to Myspace, while remaining faithful to the live, dialogic essence of black vernacular. As Kelley has written, “folk” and “authentic” cultures can and do use new technologies to transmit orality (Kelley, 1992). Videos of go-go have been integrated since the early 1980s. An early DVD craze in 2003 preceded the YouTube amateur video juggernaut (Hopkinson, 2003b).

In the early 1980s, there were several attempts to bring go-go into an international delivery system, much like more “successful” attempts with reggae and hip-hop. In the early 1980s, the Island Records entrepreneur Chris Blackwell visited the Washington, D.C. go-go scene intent on signing all of the bands and replicating his success with Bob Marley (O’Connor, 1999). Blackwell tried to create a feature film vehicle for go-go. The 1986 film *Good To Go* depicted the mid-1980s crime-ridden Washington, D.C. (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). The movie flopped, and was even seen as an offensive portrayal by the go-go community (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001; O’Connor, 1999).

The excitement and international interest helped to create a fertile period for go-go during the mid-1980s. Chuck Brown, EU, Trouble Funk and Rare Essence toured outside of the District of Columbia and there was a brief go-go craze in London. The mainstream attention culminated with the appearance of EU in the Spike Lee film *School Daze*, spawning a hit single in “Da Butt” in the late 1980s. Aside from brief flashes of national media attention and “crossover” record sales, go-go has

remained a community-based art form. Like the juju industry, go-go is entrenched in the local nocturnal economy.

After its height in the mid-1980s, go-go and hip-hop developed on parallel tracks in Washington, D.C. Go-go never made that transition from live, discursive party music. A new generation of go-go bands influenced to a greater extent by hip-hop has emerged but has still never made the transition from a live community-based art form that is by definition untranslatable in a studio context. O'Connor (1999) noted that in the 1990s, a new generation of bands began to take over the go-go scene, led by the bands Backyard, Northeast Groovers, and Junkyard. Unlike the funk-inspired early generation of go-go bands, O'Connor notes that these are "members of hip-hop's first real generation" whose sound reflects their coming of age under Washington D.C.'s most violent period.

Cultural movements typically take off (hip-hop), or die off (disco.) The answer to why go-go has resisted either trajectory are numerous, a few of which will be explored during the rest of this dissertation. O'Connor believes that the music form has not been accepted outside of the District of Columbia because "the super extended groove which is Go-Go...is just too foreign for outsiders to understand."

O'Connor continued:

Unless you grow up in the Washington area you will not appreciate the significance of a good "pocket", "socket", and "roto-tom groove." In other words, the percussion work that is the music's engine room....In the end, Go-Go remains appealing because it goes completely against the grain. As a scene it is neither slick, pretty, polished, or accepted on a larger level. For over 20 years it has flourished on a regional level surviving numerous ups and downs. No one familiar with it doubts for a second that it will survive another 20. (O'Connor, 1999)

Go-go has resoundingly failed to establish a consistent constituency beyond the Washington, D.C. Beltway. In spite of, or perhaps, because of its intensely local nature, it remains the supreme expression of identity, culture—and reality—in many of Washington's black communities. Thus, few black expressive forms are more deeply engaged in responding to the enduring trans-Atlantic call than go-go.

## Chapter 4: Club U: Cultural Geography of a Chocolate City

**Charles Stephenson Jr:** Until this situation [of focusing exclusively on markets inside the District] is addressed seriously, go-go, unfortunately, will remain a force in and around Washington, D.C. (which can no longer be referred to as Chocolate City.)

**Kip Lornell:** Of course D.C. is still C.C.! What's really changed?

(Lornell & Stephenson, 2001, p. 232)

### OVERVIEW

By day, the building at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets in Northwest Washington, D.C. was the Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center, a District of Columbia government building where workers pushed pencils in offices such as the Management and Employee Services Administration, Customer Service and Records Management, Recruiting and Personnel Actions, and the Office of Special Review. Several nights a week, after the workers went home and the sunset, the ground floor of the building was transformed into “Club U.” At one weekly concert and party, liquor flowed and the dance floor exploded with the sounds of one of the city’s oldest go-go bands, Rare Essence, performing before hundreds of fans well into the early-morning hours.

For most of the 1990s and early 2000s, Club U grew to become a high-profile showcase for go-go in the city, heavily promoted and broadcast live on a local FM radio station. This arrangement was largely unacknowledged by Washington’s “mainstream” media and political establishment. That changed on the fateful

morning of February 13, 2005. A dispute between patrons on the dance floor escalated into the stabbing death of Terrance Brown (Broadway, 2005). Brown's death sparked an explosion of local mainstream news coverage of a heated debate among citizens and government officials who expressed shock that such a private/public arrangement would take place. The debate evolved into more than 40 hours of hearings conducted by the city's Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) board to determine whether the club should be allowed to keep its liquor license. After several months of hearings and debate, the ABC board voted to revoke the club's liquor license. (District of Columbia Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005) This ended one of the longest-running go-gos that had helped to bring cultural life back to the once-magnificent U Street black corridor.

### **Closing a Chapter on a Black Public Sphere**

The term "go-go" is used to denote both a musical genre unique to Washington and the physical meeting space at which the happenings take place. In February 2005, Club U was just one of any number of go-gos operating in the DC metropolitan area. It met a similar fate to many go-go clubs that have come and gone, both peacefully and not, over the years but never saw the light of the "mainstream." As a largely nocturnal phenomenon operating in a variety of settings, public and private, go-go collapses boundaries between the socially constructed notions of "private" and "public," "underground," versus "mainstream." For the dozen-plus years that the club operated in a high-profile government building with little notice, it could be argued that it *was* the mainstream in the black public sphere. In fact, there is

no public space that more fully embodies go-go's role as a black public sphere—a cultural space, and ritual location that both is the site and producer of news. The club's physical location has been a traditional geographic locus of black public life in the District for nearly a century. The debate at the ABC hearings underscores the black public sphere's struggle for survival as the District of Columbia underwent rapid economic development.

Hannah Arendt (1958) described the paradoxical boundary between private and the public spheres thusly: "It is through the inversion of things that should be hidden and should be shown," she writes, that we discover "how rich and manifold the hidden can be under conditions of intimacy" (p. 72). In the case of Club U, the private and public manifestations of this black public sphere existed on parallel, largely invisible planes, buffered by race, socioeconomic status, and even the time of day, until they were forced to collide by the tragic death of Terrance Brown. Thus, go-go is a public sphere in the literal geographic sense Habermas intended. Go-go is a place, a process, and an event. In this context, go-go serves as Black Washington's "chora" or sacred space. Thus, this chapter will explore the shifting political and historical dimensions of go-go's role as a black nationalist commodity woven into the cultural geography of the Chocolate City.

### **A Cultural Space**

Habermas (1964) first introduced the idea of a "public sphere" in the context of emerging bourgeois society of early 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In this conception, the public sphere was a realm of public life accessible to the general population where



individuals could assemble to discuss and debate the topics of the day. In its earlier incarnation, the public sphere took place in physical spaces that facilitated public discussion such as; coffee houses, parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs, meetings halls, and other public places that could facilitate this face-to-face discourse.

Korr (2001) describes cultural landscapes as a “cumulative record of the work of humans and nature in a certain place...which reflect the beliefs and values of the peoples in that place at different times.” Here I will follow Korr’s five-point model in analyzing the hearing transcripts for the 2005 ABC board hearings related to Club U. I begin with a description of historical dimensions, a discussion of the boundaries, a view of shifting perceptions, then explore the dynamic relationship, and finally, provide a cultural analysis. Within each, I will splice in passages from the board hearings, allowing the various stakeholders to articulate in their own words the meanings embedded in this particular cultural landscape.

## **Part I. Historical Dimensions**

To fully understand the cultural geography of Washington and the discourse of 2005, a brief discussion of Washington’s colonial and racial identity is necessary. As a federal city, the fate of Black Washington is inextricably intertwined with that of the United States as a whole. The city’s racial composition, combined with colonial governance, ruled by an ever-shifting federal electorate, has made the District of Columbia both a laboratory and bellwether for national racial policy. In 1791, Maryland and Virginia, both slave states, donated swampland to make up the

diamond-shaped District of Columbia. Slavery was legal in the early history of the District—much to the chagrin of abolitionist members of Congress who sent so many bills to Congress regarding slavery in the District that in 1836, an eight-year moratorium was called against their introduction (Green, 1967, p. 37).

The historian Green (1967) described how this began a pattern of federal elected officials using the District as a “political football”—a testing ground for government innovations that could not be passed in their home districts but which they hoped to later apply to the country at large (Green, 1967). The election of President Abraham Lincoln in 1860 bode well for Black Washington. In April 1862—nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the rest of the United States—Congress emancipated the 3,100 slaves owned by District citizens, paying the slaveholders \$300 for each slave. During the same year, Congress passed a law that required public schools in the District to admit blacks. The colonial governance structure allowed Congress to override the objections of local white municipal officials who feared that the District’s positioning between two slave-holding states would transform the city into a haven for blacks (Green, 1967, p. 67). During Reconstruction, this pattern continued. In 1866, Congress overrode President Andrew Johnson’s veto and extended the right to vote to African American men living in the District. The federal 1875 Civil Rights Act gave blacks everywhere the freedoms enjoyed by Black Washingtonians (Green, 1967, p. 113).

Fears by colonial authorities that these political vagaries might create a black mecca in Washington turned out to be well founded. Over the first two hundred years of its existence, the complexion of District of Columbia citizenry became darker and

darker. Like many Southern slave states, Washington always boasted a high black population, roughly a third of District residents being black (Green, 1967). By 1865, 40,000 “human contraband,” or former slaves, had flocked to the District, with the end of the Civil War coinciding with the first wave of urbanization (Green, 1967; Modan, 2007). After the founding of the historically black Howard University in 1867 and Post-Reconstruction, a black economic base continued to grow. Many educated blacks that came for federal civil service and military jobs stayed. Generally speaking, black Washingtonians were educated and prosperous. By the 1880s, most black leaders in Washington veered increasingly toward a form of black nationalism (Green, 1967). In 1890, the local black newspaper the *Washington Bee* proclaimed the city “colored man’s paradise” (Green, 1967, p.143).

Washington, D.C. boasted the largest urban black population in the United States until Harlem overtook it in 1920 (Williams & Smith, 2001). Washington was the incubator for what would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance, with key figures such as Howard University professors Alain Locke and Sterling Brown, and Howard graduate Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, who would write evocatively of the time he spent in Washington after college (Anderson, 2001). By 1957, blacks became the majority of residents in Washington, D.C., the highest of any major American city (Gilbert, 1968, p. 3). In the 1970s, artists such as George Clinton of Parliament used recordings like “Chocolate City” inspired by the majority black Washington, D.C. The song critiqued middle-class flight from the inner city neighborhoods and institutions (Neal, 1999).

Jazz great and Washingtonian Duke Ellington often said that his forthright cultural nationalism stemmed from his upbringing in segregated black Washington. According to the music scholar Anderson (2001) black Washington gave Ellington a “sense of being part of a historic procession.” He named his first band in New York City, “The Washingtonians.” In his autobiography Ellington remembered his education at an all-black high school in Washington, D.C. thusly:

Negro history was crammed into the curriculum, so that we would know our people all the way back. They had pride there, the greatest race pride, and at that time there was some sort of movement to desegregate the schools in Washington, D.C. Who do you think were the first to object? Nobody but the proud Negroes of Washington, who felt that the kind of white kids we would be thrown in with were not good enough (Ellington, 1973, p.17).

For all the legal benefits of living in the capital city, the political disenfranchisement still cast a pall for black Washingtonians. Over the years, there have been many efforts to alter Washington’s colonial governance structure, which disenfranchised District of Columbia voters as the black population climbed while whites began to flee to the Washington suburbs. In 1961, with ratification of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, District residents gained the right to vote for president and vice president. In the Post-Watergate era, the District was poised to get full representation when both the House and Senate passed the Civil Rights Act of 1978, which would create two Senators to be elected by District of Columbia citizens and either one or two House members, depending on population. Once again, the fate of the District of Columbia was left to the will of the nation as a whole. The Amendment was submitted to each of the state legislatures for approval, requiring ratification by 38

states in seven years. In seven years, only 16 states have voted to ratify, leading many to openly question the racial subtext of why the measure was rejected in the states (Modan, 2007).

Senator Ted Kennedy, a Democrat from Massachusetts, spoke publicly of a national “fear that senators elected from the District of Columbia may be too liberal, too urban, too black or too Democratic” as the real reason that states rejected the measure (Modan, 2007). While local construction of Washington, D.C., as a black, if “Secret City” according to the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine* existed long before 1978, the debate in Congress, state legislatures, and press conferences reified this racialization of Washington in the national discourse. Kennedy’s statements also explicitly linked the disenfranchisement of the District of Columbia as a racial issue on the national stage (Modan, 2007, p. 37-46).

Because of the city’s federal status, residents of the District live under some of the least democratic conditions in all of the United States with neither voting representation in Congress nor ultimate authority over municipal taxes (Modan, 2007). This political reality has had palpable effects on the psyche of black Washington, as anthropologist Tanya Y. Price (1999) points out in her study of the construction of white and black spaces in Washington. Price writes that many of the city’s social ills stem from the colonial relationship with the federal government and the historical ambivalence that body has had with the city’s majority black population. She describes the psychological barriers erected around the “white spaces” associated with federal Washington, and the “black spaces” that comprise most residential areas (Price, 1999). The political reality of the Chocolate City

encodes what Dubois once described in a 1945 international human rights lecture as “quasi colonial” status of black laborers settled in the slums or large cities (Bhabha, 1994).

### **Cultural and Ritual Roots of U Street**

I’m a Washingtonian and I grew up in Washington, been on U Street all my life. Had a chance to go anywhere in the world that I wanted to go, but I chose U Street because that is part of my home. And I’ve been down there to fight so that we could have progress.

--Club U supporter John Snipes at the ABC board hearings.

(Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Within this construction of these “black spaces,” in Washington, the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets holds an unmistakable symbolism for black people, one that approaches the sacred. In the ritual approach to cultural landscape analysis advocated by theologian Lane (1988), landscapes are divided between the ancient Greek notions of “topos” or spiritually inert sites, or “chora” sacred sites that are imbued with meaning through common bonds linking elements of that landscape. Chora, Lane writes, “carries its own energy and power, summoning its participants to a common dance, to the choreography” (Lane, 1988, p.39). These meanings are typically created through a “purposeful ritual activity” that people experience which infuses the space with spirituality. Beginning in the 1920s, the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets was Black

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth all the comments from witnesses testifying from the District of Columbia Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, Case No. 28078-05/012C. Levelle, Inc, t/a he Coach & IV Restaurant on Feb. 19, March 2, and May 10, 2005. Hard copies of this transcript were reviewed at Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration, 941 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 7200. Washington, DC 20002.

Washington's chora, the nerve center and cultural heartbeat of this black social and economic power. Located near the historically black Howard University, by the 1930s, the block was the center of a black "City Within a City," where more than 300 black businesses -- theaters, nightclubs, jazz clubs, billiard halls, and restaurants -- catered to the black population under rigid racial segregation. U Street was the meeting place. The place to go show off Easter Sunday finest, to have tea, to celebrate after boxer Joe Louis knocked out his white challenger. To listen to jazz, go to a bar. (Hopkinson, 2003b)

Chidester and Linenthal (1995) emphasize conflicts in their conceptualization of a cultural landscape, arguing that the degree to which people choose to fight and die determine its sacredness, noting that American sacred space has been produced from the inception as multicultural and intercultural conflict, making "conflict and sacred space in America go hand in hand" (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995, p. x). Throughout much of the history of Washington, the intersection of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets has been the site of racial struggle. Decades before the formal launch of the Civil Rights Movement, the New Negro Alliance agitated to end discrimination by local businesses, rallying at the corner of Fourteenth and U Streets in the 1930s. This invisible boundary was reinforced on Thursday, April 4, 1968, the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. A riot began at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street and spread fires through several black neighborhoods and major commercial intersections in the city, administering the final rites for what was D.C.'s Black Broadway. After the riots following Martin Luther King's assassination and on the day of what would have

been Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's March, Washington's first black mayor, Walter Washington, explained the uprising thusly:

“There is a voice coming from this city's ghetto neighborhoods. That voice says: ‘We would like to be relevant to what happens in our communities. We would like to have entrepreneurship. We would like to be part of the American dream’ ” (Gilbert, 1968, p. 208).

### **Cultural and Narratives of Club U**

Several speakers at the 2005 ABC board hearing gave firsthand accounts of the origins of U Street and the significance that it holds for black people. That deference was a reflection of the cultural significance embedded in the story of Club U. As Korr (2001) points out, “personal narratives may allow recovery of spatial experiences and perceptions that neither physical objects nor documentary evidence alone can explain.”

During the 2005 hearings, the ABC board indulged Jerry S. Cooper, who testified on behalf of Club U. He gave the board and hearing room a first-hand history lesson about the origins of black Washington. Cooper spoke of his arrival in Washington in 1930, his participation in the Washington Blaze, a segregated barnstorming basketball team, and their world championship in 1943. The board gave him due deference, refused to rush him as he talked about his retirement in 1973 after 43 years of service to the U.S. Census Bureau. Similarly, John Snipes, another witness and longtime member of Washington's black community and a former



Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner spoke the significance of the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated, that's where the people gathered and whether it was positive or negative—it was negative as far as I was concerned--to start to move to whatever was regarded as riots. I call them disturbances, but at that point Martin Luther King was preparing to come to Washington to do the Poor People's March. So you had a lot of people from out of town [there] (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board 2005).

Snipes went on to discuss the downfall of the once-proud strip, how it fell prey to crime and drugs, to a point that even he avoided going there. The situation deteriorated for nearly two decades. Snipes provided a first-hand remembrance of the spark that led government officials to make an effort to reclaim the corner:

The next deal was when Officer Snyder I think was his name, a member of the Third district, got killed across from where the Reeves Center is now. [It happened] in the daytime. They said he was interfering with a drug deal and he got killed right on the spot.... We had people in the neighborhood from every walk, St. Augustine's Church, Walker Memorial and all of these people got together and said "We can't have that in our community.... And that's when the idea of the Reeves Center was put together (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

In 1986 Washington Mayor Marion Barry cut the ribbon on the Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center, located at the scarred corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets. Despite the completion of the sparkling, modern seven-story edifice, it would still take some time for the development to catch on. For the hundreds of government workers who worked along the strip, choices for retail and food were abysmal. In 1992, Warren Williams Sr., a liquor store owner, heard that the city was looking for entrepreneurs to open a restaurant to feed the government workers. Williams' partner and president

of Coach & IV, the company that owns Club U, Paul D. Gwynn, testified at the ABC hearing about their initial trepidation about the venture.

Half of U Street was closed down. There was no lighting in that area. And [Club U owner Warren] Williams came to me one day and said, excuse the expression, “Just what do you see there?” I said. “Man, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Because what you see now don’t necessarily have to be....Metro here is developing and there is a government building here, let’s take our shot at the business (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

They opened a restaurant in the building’s first floor, catering largely to government workers. That clientele ebbed and flowed as various government offices were moved in and out. Williams decided to expand and begin hosting happy hours. Then the Williamses began to bring in live music. When a go-go promoter approached Warren Williams Jr., son of the owner, with an idea to begin promoting live go-go shows, “Club U” was born. It proved to be the biggest draw to the building, and one that would sustain the business financially. Club U would be no haven from violence, as a stream of speakers at the 2005 ABC hearings would later point out in excruciating detail.

ABC BOARD MEMBER ISAAC: So Mr. Snipes sir, are you saying that historically 14<sup>th</sup> and U has been actually an intersection at which the violent activity has occurred?

SNIPES: ....You can’t solve it, but I’m just in my mind, and this is the mindset of the average person that you see in Washington, D.C. that understands Washington, D.C. Maybe they don’t approve of what goes on (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board 2005).

## **Part II. Shifting Political and Cultural Boundaries of 14<sup>th</sup> and U**

As might be expected for a national capital city, the government was a dominant force for creating, altering and maintaining the boundaries of the landscape at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street, Northwest. Under legal segregation, the officials confined blacks to live and shop there. The officials in charge of the public transportation system also designated the intersection of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets to be a transfer point for commuters trying to get to various parts of downtown Washington (Williams & Smith, 2001).

As the Civil Rights movement lifted official racial barriers, other cognitive boundaries were erected in their place. Post-desegregation, 14<sup>th</sup> Street marked a racial dividing line, one that would be upheld by real estate agents and conventional wisdom until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: West of 14<sup>th</sup> Street is where whites live, and East of 14<sup>th</sup> Street is mostly populated by black residents (Hopkinson, 2003a). Once the 1968 riots raged, that seemed to reify that designation (Williams & Smith, 2001). Throughout the city, “White public spaces” were carefully constructed and maintained by federal professionals through social and economic barriers (Price, 1999). Whites have traditionally formed a small part of the landscape, but because DC has a colonial status, whites have been formidable players off-stage. This paradox reigns even in an overwhelmingly majority-black city such as Washington, where in 2005, blacks held most visible positions of authority in the municipal power structure.

Even in the segregation-era heyday of U Street, there was a degree of racial fluidity on U Street: In the 1930s, whites patronized the cultural establishments, visiting bars and attending concerts; Blacks were served at the counter at the white-owned People’s Drug Store, also located at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets (Smith & Williams,

2001). Once legal segregation was lifted, economics began to determine what the landscape would look like: Blacks and whites of means left for the suburbs and other less dense parts of the city. This exodus was vastly accelerated by the 1968 riots, which also affected other black economic hubs such as H Street. Those that were left behind were largely poor, leaving criminal forces to supplant the role of government in imposing order.

In 1986, with the erection of Reeves Municipal Center, the city government attempted to once again stake out a boundary, and reestablish authority over the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street. The sparkling building, with glass atrium and all the modern amenities, was a bid by the city government to complete the spiritual arc of the site: The first phase was a site of black pride, self-determination, and economic power. The second phase was neglect, abuse, and spectacular racial trauma of the 1968 riots. With the building of the Reeves Center, the intersection could be a site for healing. The government headed by then-mayor Marion Barry, hoped that it would spur more development, and return it to a functioning part of the city.

When the owners of Club U began operating in 1992, they erected a new kind of boundary. These were boundaries expressed in time. By day, Reeves Center was a building with offices with various District government agencies. Late at night, it was Club U, appealing to a black, mostly working-class crowd. In 2004, an even more impressive symbolic space was erected at the intersection of 13<sup>th</sup> and U Streets: The Ellington Plaza Apartments. It was a \$46 million, 8-story, 186 –unit building of luxury apartments, one that dominated most of the block and overshadowed

everything else on the U Street corridor. The building's inhabitants were overwhelming upper-middle class and predominantly white.

### **Part III Shifting Perceptions/ of Club U**

In February 2005, the cultural narratives and perceptions of the space in and around Club U shifted depending on one's vantage point. A parade of government witnesses appeared before the ABC hearing over several months in 2005 to talk about the night when Terrance Brown was stabbed on the dance floor. Emergency personnel, patrons, and workers at the building told a story of chaos that night. A man knocked out his girlfriend after he saw her dancing with another man. When the woman's friend tried to intervene, the boyfriend knocked her out. When the ambulance took the two women to the hospital, the boyfriend, by then ejected by the club bouncers, began shooting at the ambulance. So many fights broke out on the dance floor that night that when Terrance Brown left the dance floor, security personnel didn't initially realize he had been stabbed and his life was threatened. They sat him against the wall on the street as they left to attend to another fight that had broken out.

City Councilman Jim Graham, one of the few white speakers, testified to the board of all the many problems that the club had had over the years. He had convened a press conference hours after Brown's stabbing, calling for the club to be closed (Broadway, 2005). Graham quoted a letter from the city's police chief requesting the city to revoke its liquor license. Graham told the board about a constituent coming to

his office to complain of being raped at the club. Graham left the hearing early to attend the funeral of Terrance Brown.

Officer Larry D. McCoy, Commander of Third District, Metropolitan Police Department, cited a string of crimes that occurred outside the club before the hearing room audience. In November 2003, a group of drunken Club U patrons were ejected from the club, and then began to fight. A man shot two of his friends, then sped his car out of the parking lot nearby. A police officer chased the driver before he crashed into the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets. The assailant got out of the car and shot the officer in the finger. Earlier in the month, another victim was stabbed outside the club and died several days later. Officer McCoy showed the panel a statistical map of crime around Club U, which showed the high incidence of crimes taking place within 1,000 feet of the establishment on days when Club U operated. When asked if he believed the club should be closed, this was Officer McCoy's response:

MCCOY: Yes ma'am, I do. I think it should be closed. Some nights, depending on the crowd. You bring in a good crowd in there, there are no problems. You have, you know, this go-go draw. I mean, I'll just tell you whenever I was over in the Seventh District, any place—if you have a black tie event, you don't have any problems, but you bring go-go in; you're going to have problems" (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

Taking the stand shortly after, another police officer, Paul Johnson, agreed. He described arriving on the scene at Club U the night when Terrance Brown was stabbed to death. He said Brown had told the officers that he had been stabbed with an unidentified object, but he was otherwise uncooperative with police. In his

testimony Officer Johnson presented his own theory about the source of problems at the site, which echoed Officer McCoy's:

MEMBER THOMPSON: In your professional opinion, what do you think of this club? Do you think it is a danger to the public?

OFFICE PAUL JOHNSON: I wouldn't say it's the club. I would say in my professional opinion, it's the—whenever we have the go-go music, there's violence that comes with it, I guess. And I guess I can associate it with the music because several of the clubs have go-go. And every time there is a go-go going on at the club, there is a higher tendency to have violence...I mean serious violence, not just, you know, fighting.

MEMBER THOMPSON: Meaning someone is going to get hurt?

PAUL JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.  
(Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005)

In her testimony, another police officer, Inspector Diane Groomes, noted that in the previous two years, there had been three homicides near the club. In 2003 there were 383 calls to summon police to the Reeves Center, and in 2004, 483 calls. She also told the board about crime statistics that linked violent crime to the operation of Club U. She said the kind of people that the club attracted helped create the violent conditions there. She was even more specific in identifying the “problem” demographic.

INSPECTOR DIANE GROOMES:... On Saturdays, it's Rare Essence night, which is a go-go band, and that brings a lot of our young youth from the city.

ABC BOARD MEMBER ASTRA: And younger means more problematic?

GROOMES: A lot—I mean, I guess due to immaturity and alcohol mix. It doesn't mix well (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

A stream of witnesses took the stand in the ABC hearing room over the course of several months of hearings, to offer a different perspective on the club. They pointed out that the high crime rates preceded Club U and would likely continue whether a “magnet” such as Club U exists. They said these were societal problems that transcend a form of music, or the management of a particular space. Club U lawyer David Wilmot expounded on this idea in his opening statements to the board.

We need to be concerned about [the murder of Terrance Brown], and that’s well beyond what Club U can do. That’s well beyond what the Williamses [the owners] can do. That’s well beyond what they can do alone...There’s a cause and effect...What is causing this cancer within our community? (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

A group of witnesses, some inspired by an email and FM radio campaign to “Save the Go-Go” lined up to testify on the club’s behalf. Few of the witnesses chosen to take the stand were actual go-go fans. It speaks to the economic and political resonance of go-go that many of Club U’s defenders were members of the city’s black grassroots political, business, and education establishments. They focused on the meaning that Club U and its management represented in local neighborhoods. Their perceptions of Club U’s owners were as responsible and sensitive members of the community. They supported the genre of go-go in theory although few of them appeared to be regular fans.

Shelore Ann Cary Williams, who lived nearby on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and was formerly principal of a private Catholic school located two blocks away from Club U, testified about working with the owners of Club U, their paying to clean the whole



street “spotless” after their parties. Club U agreed to pay the school’s security guard to escort patrons to their cars. Cary was also the Chair of Development Corporation for Columbia Heights, which issued a resolution in support of the Club U keeping its license soon after the murder of Terrance Brown, a forceful statement of the owner's right to operate in that environment. Williams told the board:

[Club U owners who incorporated under the name Coach & IV] are model operators in the sense that they don’t just give for political vote. They give to senior citizens. They give to the homeless. They give to the sick and shut-in. They give to children. They give to families each and every time you ask...

I honestly believe that a name may carry you, may carry your image. And Coach & IV is a great name, and a lot of people respect that name and so forth (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

Lawrence Guyot, another Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner, lawyer and civil rights activist, spoke of the role the owners of Club U played in healing the community. In the construction of racialized spaces that Price points out, Cooper viewed Club U as a black sanctuary.

It was a place that the community could feel that they were welcome. For example, on many occasions, person in the community have asked the management to hold wakes, which are very important to many of us in the minority communities, where we don’t have places for wakes after funerals. And I’ve never once heard of them refusing to help people with wakes (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board 2005).

Guyot also spoke of how the black political community rallied around the owners of Club U, despite the mainstream media attention focused on the death of Terrance Brown. He also shared his experiences with the Club U owners as benevolent figures in the community—proprietors of a private

enterprise that had become a source of financial support for individuals who otherwise would have none.

When I ever asked the management of this company to invest in community activities, they did not hesitate. For the last four years, food for 300 people. They have always been available for the Ledroit Park Civic Association. When Gage-Eckington [elementary school] wanted to have a mother-and-daughter tea, 300 people were fed at that simply at a request (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board 2005).

Another witness, Sinclair Matthew Skinner, who owned a dry cleaning shop nearby, was a past Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner, and spoke on behalf of the Black U Street Association, for which he served as executive director. That such a race specific group even existed spoke to the defensive posture of the black U Street community at a time when the neighborhood remained overwhelmingly black. The group gathered more than 500 signatures in support of the club, in particular, and go-go music in general, with demands that the police do a better job in protecting the citizenry. Through his race-specific language, he implied that police resources are stingily doled out to crime victims when they are black, which again speaks to the colonial status of blacks in the District. Skinner testified that the focus on the music genre was a red herring for the fundamental problem the death of Terrance Cooper exposed: community policing.

We wanted to make sure that all of the attention given, that we had a murderer still on the loose. We have a lot of the politicians bring up go-go music. Should that stay or go? Clubs, should they stay and go? ...Somehow all of the media was on clubs and not on which way did he go and what did he have on, which to me seems more appropriate (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

## **Dynamic Psychological Dimensions**

I understood that that was a dope market or a drug market. Then they moved to 14<sup>th</sup> and maybe T Street. And then with the Reeves Center going up, I think they moved them up to 14<sup>th</sup> and W and then 14<sup>th</sup>. They just kept moving them.

--Club U supporter John Snipes (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005).

The landscape is a manifestation of material culture, but it is one that is far from static. As Korr points out, there is a give and take relationship between humans and their built environments. No landscape is completely cultural, Korr (2001) writes, “necessitating the consideration of agency on all sides.” Earlier I discussed the shifting boundaries of U Street, and the agents that were able to move them. Here I will expand on the most recent seismic shift taking place on the landscape at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, one mirrored elsewhere in Washington and in urban centers across the nation: gentrification. Within the Club U narrative as it played out in the ABC hearings, gentrification played a major role.

Economic development of U Street was initially set in motion by black actors who were in control of the District of Columbia government, who built a Metro station and Reeves Center in the early 1980s. Now that the economic development had taken off, the subtext behind the testimony of many of the Club U supporters was whether blacks would continue to be economic players. Many of the speakers at the ABC hearing linked the move to shut down Club U as a reflection of the new complexion and political reality of U Street—an encroachment. By 2005, when Brown’s Club U stabbing took place, the neighborhood was in the midst of experiencing a housing and retail boom, which challenged the identity of Washington

as the “Chocolate City.” Places that were previously constructed as “black spaces” were no longer so, making U Street among the highest profile historically black neighborhoods to see a racial shift (Jervey, 2005). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2005 when the ABC hearings took place, for the first time in decades, blacks were no longer the majority of homeowners in the District of Columbia. In 2000, 54 percent of DC homeowners were black, and 41 percent were white. But the decline of 6,000 black homeowners during that five-year period, and a surge of 7,000 additional white homeowners brought the two groups in virtual parity in a 2005 U.S. Census survey (Layton & Keating, 2006).

In 2005, the Ellington luxury apartment complex towered over and dominated the new landscape on U Street, now billed by real estate agents as “New to U.” The complex drew a new quality of retail and entertainment outlets that pointed to a more upscale clientele. There were high-end furniture stores, a booming theater district further down 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and perhaps most symbolic, “Sun on U,” the corridor’s first tanning salon located on the ground level of The Ellington (Vargas, 2005). The Reeves Center, which had since 1986 been the dominant force on the strip, was now greatly overshadowed, both literally and psychologically.

As Wilmot, the attorney for Club U pointed out in his opening day testimony before the board, Club U is owed a debt for being pioneers in contributing to the vitality of the strip.

We are on the verge of a renaissance within this community. That building, the Reeves Center, was the centerpiece of that renaissance. Marion Barry and his administration fought to locate that building there to do what? To quiet the ravages of the riots of 1968... Without that building there wouldn’t be the economic development and the

revival that's there now, and central to that was the location of businesses such as Club U. (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005)

Several witnesses in defense of Club U emphasized a sense of authenticity and attempted to assert the perspectives of native black Washingtonians, whom they perceived as being pushed aside. As Snipes explains. "On the one side you have a lot of foreign people coming in, condominiums shooting up all over the place, 200, 500, whatever thousand. Then you have another group of people who have been up there all their lives who don't really have a lot or you have people that come to that area."

Similarly, Club U business partner Paul D. Gwynn asserted that despite the change in the racial makeup, he felt that their business—and go-go—still had a place on U Street and the larger black public sphere. Gwynn said as much to the ABC board.

Well it's been a drastic change up there. The complexion of the area has changed tremendously, increase in taxes of houses, new condos, new homes, new restaurants, new nightclubs. It's a various matter of things changing up there to make this area supposedly a "better" area. And I think we fit in that new place what's going on up there. (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, 2005)

An exchange between Williams, an attorney and former Catholic school principal perhaps crystallized the debate for many of the defenders of the club. She suggested that reigning public policy is to evicting "problem" elements within the black public sphere without addressing the roots of the social problems. When asked what she thought was being done about the social problems, Williams had this response. "The only thing I know that has taken place is the government appears to be moving loads of folks to

somewhere else and putting high- rise buildings there at a high cost. But I don't see anything else happening," she told the board. Lawrence Guyot Jr., the Civil Rights veteran and neighborhood activist accused local alcohol beverage regulators, the local media and officials of conspiring to purge all the black elements from U Street.

GUYOT: In my opinion, I've dealt with every little application on U Street or on 9<sup>th</sup> Street and the pattern is very, very clear. What we're really talking about here is one racial motif for blacks, another for whites. In the Wonderland [a white club], there was a stabbing. No one has heard about it. *The Post* never mentioned it. I would suspect maybe it hasn't been investigated or not. But if W.W. [Club U owner Warren Williams] were white, we wouldn't be here today.

ABC BOARD: You said at some point at any ANC meeting that there is a constant attack upon black-owned liquor licenses in D.C.

GUYOT: Oh, yes. And it's led by [white D.C. councilman] Jim Graham and we're talking about no more than 20 people. That the same people are involved in attacking the connivers, the same people closed [another U Street go-go club] Between Friends and the same people have now alleged [Club U owner Warren Williams] W.W. as their target. The records of ABC will show that...So I think this, as far as I'm concerned, is a golden opportunity to really move race relations in Washington, D.C. way ahead. Let's restore this license and move on. (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board 2005)

Club U owner Warren Williams Sr., had few words for the board. He mostly invoked his Washington bonafides having lived or worked in the neighborhood for 60 years. He told the board that he "climbed the Logan" statue, again, adding to his claim for authenticity. He estimated that in his years of owning Club U, at least 100,000 people have passed through his doors, which makes the Brown tragedy an aberration. He again, emphasized the societal sources for violence, and implied that if it doesn't happen at or around his club, it will likely happen somewhere else. He

invoked a racial “we” in speaking of societal problems that disproportionately affect black people. He worried of the implications of accepting policies that eject rather than rehabilitate. He hinted that allowing sacred spaces in the black public sphere to shrink could have dire consequences. “If we can’t behave and keep a club open at that rate, where do we go in Washington, D.C., if you close this club? Where else could I go? It’s not the club I fear.”

## **Part V. Cultural Analysis**

What are the cultural and political implications of the aesthetics of this landscape at 14<sup>th</sup> and U? Who stands to gain and to lose from its design and appearance? Naturally the local-federal political structure, and anyone else vested in high-profile symbolism to signal that a new day is reigning in Washington stood to gain. Much of the mainstream news media discourse focused on the absurdity of having a go-go in a DC government building (Washington Post, 2005) --a dozen years after the fact. The location of this particular go-go is the ultimate symbol of go-go’s role as black public sphere, the place where public affairs were discussed and the municipal bureaucracy was administered. That Club U was located in a District of Columbia government building speaks to the political, social, and economic role of go-go, which was ultimately privileged and woven into the tapestry of public domain. Go-go was black Washington’s soundscape, collapsing boundaries between “private” and “public.” Go-go found its way into a District of Columbia government building whose colonial status and decidedly black composition make it both a symbol of black power and impotence at the same time. The Club U cultural narrative is a vivid illustration of

shifting power and access dynamics, and a contest of meanings over this cultural landscape and the value of human life that is a reflection of the seismic changes in the city as a whole.

Both proponents and opponents of Club U viewed this go-go club as container. The government saw it as a container for pathology, violence, and destruction. It was seen as a site for so-called “black-on-black violence,” strife, and tension. It was a container for societal menace, youth out of control, a dysfunctional municipal government. In the end the ABC board argued that the historical, cultural and racial landscapes were irrelevant. By withdrawing the license, it voted in favor of the sanctity of the life of Terrance Brown, over one businessman’s right to profit from a city-subsidized nightclub.

The defenders of club U also viewed Club U as a container: for black cultural tradition, for economic self-empowerment--and societal flaws. It was seen as a black sanctuary, a refuge for a rare, authentic and no doubt, essential black Washington that is now under attack. Club U supporters abstracted the debate beyond the death of one person, to the political, racial, economic, and colonial subtext. They viewed the liquor license debate as a ploy for the white powers that be to symbolically expunge black people from their “home.”

Even before the 1968 riots, the violence that reigned at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U went unchecked. Largely existing under the mainstream radar, go-go was an accepted part of the black public sphere, and welcomed as a way to bring some vitality and life back to the corridor. But in the midst of gentrification, Club U and its young, almost exclusively black, and sometimes rowdy, working-class crowd was now viewed as a



blot on a brightening landscape, staining the aesthetic. The loss of human life continued to be tolerated and ignored in less coveted areas of the city. But on U Street, with the coming of wealthier residents, government officials elevated the loss of human life that is continually devalued in less coveted, more “black spaces” in the city.

This go-go and the building in which it was housed was erected by and for black people under the worst possible conditions, where drug dealers and criminals had taken over and chaos and dysfunction reigned. Go-go, in this context, continued black ritual traditions in line with the corridor’s history and the club’s spiritual role as a “chora,” or ritual sacred space within the public sphere helped to facilitate a healing and to exorcize the demons of the past. Its success set the stage for U Street to transform from a space that is sacred for one group to a “mainstream” space in the wake of gentrification.

For the defenders of Club U, the cognitive and psychological landscape embedded in Club U lay in the cultural history of that space and their own personal identity as native Washingtonians. The debate allowed members of the black community to forcefully articulate what go-go means, and solidly place it in the heart of the black mainstream cultural landscape. As my study of news coverage of black Washington in 1986 showed, go-go remained a marker of black class divisions as well (Hopkinson, 2006). However, the politically connected grassroots black business and political leaders speaking at the hearing showed a rare display of solidarity with the operators of Club U as an articulation of black agency and economic power.

Perhaps most notable in this debate, there were no words from the Rare Essence regulars, the go-go community, the “immature youth” themselves. An online poll was put up on a popular go-go Internet message board, Take Me Out To The Go-Go (Tmottgogo.com, 2005). The question was: “should they give them [Club U] their license back?” None said no. Fifty-two percent said yes. Forty-seven percent had the following response, helpfully illustrated by a picture posted on the message board by “TCB Tony”:



Illustration 2.

Indeed, as the illustration of the actor Gary Coleman shrugging, “Who Fuckin’ Cares?” The go-go community took about two seconds to lick their wounds. After 30 years, go-go fans have come to know the drill. Much like patrons of the blues clubs, rent parties, early jazz community in New York, and juke joints down South and virtually every other previous manifestation of the black public sphere

(Hazzard-Donald, 1992; Rose, 1994; Davis, 1999). As long as black folks own property, as long as someone can get their hands on some cymbals, a cowbell or two, a conga drum, and a microphone, folks will be getting right back up to find out where the next party is. And, someone—probably black—is going to be getting paid.

## Chapter 5: Race, Space, and Life History



A detail from Nico's collection of thousands of go-go recordings, which begins in 1978. Illustration 3.

### VIII "Tapes" for Nico Hobson

We made copies,  
Refusing to trade the ones  
With our names on them...  
'Make me a copy,'  
Carmichael said  
The day after his brother's murder  
A way of remembering  
Holding on  
....Attention  
Care.  
Respect.

-From "The Maverick Room" by Thomas Sayers Ellis (2005)

## **OVERVIEW: Dancing Lady**

It's a crisp, blue, Saturday morning in March 2006, and Washington's busy H Street, Northeast corridor is jumping with the grit and rhythms of city life. Cars swoosh past the string of stores housed in century-old attached buildings: Chicken and check-cashing joints, a Muslim shop selling oils and Egyptology books, barbershop, beauty shops, several liquor stores, and sleek new bars trying to make a way. The chilly air outside is filled with laughter, the wail of sirens, families strolling, and playful banter among strangers and street peddlers. Outside the I-Hip-Hop & Go-Go store sidewalk, a huge speaker sits on the sidewalk blasts music to entice people to come inside the store, which had just opened a few weeks before. It works—maybe a bit too well.

A 40-ish cocoa-skinned woman in a clean jeans and a sweatshirt stands on the sidewalk on the other side of the glass door, dancing wildly to the speakers blasting a medley of go-go and R&B. Her eyes stare off vacantly. Her movements are fast and clumsy and she misses the beat more than she catches it. She is in her own world. Discussion in the store quickly turns into a parlor game about what substance the woman is on. Is it alcohol, or “that diesel--” or is it PCP, a.k.a. Love Boat, buck-naked, LB, boat, a drug that has had a huge impact on the go-go scene for the worse.

“That *is* the buck naked,” “Go-Go” Nico, the store manager diagnoses.

“The boat’ll do it to you,” a customer agrees.

Maybe she is high. Maybe she's mentally ill, or both. Whatever her mind state, it's clear that this woman has spent a lot of time studying BET. About an hour into the performance, she has discarded her winter coat. She drops to the ground, and grinds her hips against the concrete. Passersby stop, gawk, and then keep stepping. A boy of about 10 years old approaches on his bike. He's picked up a good amount of speed, heading straight toward the woman as she jiggles her body around the sidewalk. "Move, Dumbass," the kid screams at her, and a deep, hearty laughter fills the store.

I conducted several hours of ethnographic interviews with Dancing Woman in my peripheral view. She comes to dance on most Saturdays. While Go-Go Nico shared his life story on Spring 2006, she danced on the other side of the glass behind him, as if performing accompaniment. Nico's life story unfolds on the street, in go-gos, in the military service. Race, class, drugs, violence and the street are recurring themes. Since the early 1990s, Nico has been a major go-go collector who sold music in all kinds of venues, from the streets, to his tricked-out van and vending stand with flashing lights, to independent music stores like this one.

The H Street store where Nico worked as a manager is nicely appointed with wood laminate floors, flat-screen monitors playing DVDs. Shelf space in the back with go-go recordings from as far back as 1979, recorded at long-shuttered places like the Howard Theater, the local jail, parks and various high schools in Prince George's County and the District. The front section is mostly \$5 mix CDs of the latest hip-hop. Under the glass case immediately as you walk into the store is a collection of the latest go-go CDs. Mostly live recordings of bands such as Rare Essence, TCB and

Backyard Band. Flat screen monitors play DVDs. There is a remote lock and alarm system that Nico never feels the need to use. He's dedicated most of his adult life to archiving and preserving thousands of live go-go recordings, which he keeps locked in temperature-controlled storage. Being in the store is fine, but he prefers the world on the other side of the glass. The street, he says, is his "element."

Nico works here six days a week after working the 3:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. shift as a cook at Ben's Chili Bowl, the legendary chili dog spot on U Street. His importance to the go-go community, as Ellis's (2005) ode to Nico excerpted above, transcends whatever place he happens to sell his wares. Former Rare Essence saxophonist and Familiar Faces front man Donnell Floyd explains Nico's role in the community thusly: "He's kind of like a historian. He's the guy, kind of like Box in [the 2002 film] *Brown Sugar*? He keeps track of who's doing what. He was writing for a little while. He's always a good person to talk to in terms of his overall perspective of the go-go community" (Personal communication, October, 2006).

Lornell & Stephenson (2001) describe P.A. tapes as "generally unauthorized recordings; essentially bootleg recordings (usually compact discs rather than tapes these days) recorded from the sound mix directly off the Public Address soundboard at a live performance. These master tapes are sold to one of the local entrepreneurs, who then duplicates the tapes either digitally onto a compact disc or onto an analog audio tape." "Because these entrepreneurs operate on the fringes of the recording industry, usually deal in cash, and generally have no written contracts, the world of go-go P.A. tapes remains murky and few are willing to talk about this aspect of go-go" (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001; p. 175).

Live performances are the essence of go-go. However the live go-go recordings, or “PAs” play a critical auxiliary role in sustaining the go-go information economy. The contents of these stores—and Nico’s personal collection of thousands of recordings that he keeps in temperature-controlled storage—are a rich archive of history and culture of Black Washington. As its chief curator, so is Nico.

I first met Nico in 2003. I was working on a *Washington Post* article about the go-go DVD craze. The article discussed the proliferation of local amateur filmmakers recording local occurrences and selling them using low-cost digital production technology, a phenomenon that would foreshadow the Youtube juggernaut. Nico was working at Mad T’s Records, an independent music store located near the U Street corridor (directly across the street from the Reeves Center) where Nico had set up a go-go section based on his collection of recordings.

Soon after I began my ethnographic research on go-go in 2005, I left a written note at Mad T’s explaining how I met Nico, and that I would like for Nico to call me. There was no response. The next time I went back to Mad T’s, the owner Carlton Tucker told me Nico didn’t work there anymore, but I could find him working at Ben’s Chili Bowl on the early morning shift. I tried over several months to catch up with Nico, but I had always missed his early-morning shift. Then I interviewed the poet Thomas Sayers Ellis, and read his 2005 book, “The Maverick Room” which included a poem about the role of go-go P.A. recordings in memory called “Tapes” that was dedicated to Nico Hobson. This reminded me to try again. In February 2006, I stopped by Ben’s on a lark after dropping off my son at school and Nico was behind the counter where he cooked breakfast. Nico agreed to meet me at a new go-go and



hip-hop record store on H Street Northeast that had just opened. So in February 2006, I went down to H Street to check out the store.

I explained to Nico my previous work as a writer for the *Washington Post* and that I was now working on a dissertation project for my doctorate. Nico was familiar with most of the articles I had written, and we chatted for a while about that. I went to the store several times until he felt comfortable moving forward. Nico was generally leery of outsiders on the scene. He said he had helped two young white filmmakers who were students at Georgetown University who had made a documentary on Go-Go called *The Pocket*. But Nico was resentful that he and many people on the scene weren't able to see the debut screening and never got a copy of the documentary itself. (Several months later, I dug up my own press copy I'd received at the *Post* and gave it to him.) Nico agreed to be a part of my project and we've become friends.

### **Underground Economies as Urban Public Sphere**

Fine, et al (2003) note the importance of connecting voices and stories of individuals back to the set of historic, structural, and economic relations that situate them. Mom & pop stores such as the one on H Street store exist in every quadrant of the District as corner stores and outdoor vending stands, as well as in many aging strip malls in Prince George's County. These are areas that were slated to be rebuilt by black businesses following the 1968 riots following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Forty years later, when this research began, these burnt communities were finally being rebuilt.

The go-go economy is filled with such informal economic arrangements often off the IRS grid. Everything from a network of geographically dispersed clothing lines, to graphic shops that create event fliers and press T-shirts.

Liebow's 1967 classic ethnography *Tally's Corner* looked at black men living in 1960s Shaw neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and described how record shops, along with carry-outs had recently joined taverns, pool halls, liquor stores, corner groceries, rooming house, secondhand stores, credit houses, pawn shops, and storefront churches as parts of a "distinctive complex of urban institutions" that have adapted to the changing needs, limited choices and eclectic tastes of inner city residents. Hyman Lewis notes in his introduction to *Tally's Corner*, that these serve more than their outward functions. "Among other things they may serve as informal communication centers, forums, places to display and assess talents and staging areas for a range of activities, legal, illegal, and extralegal. And although they exist in the heart of the city, they are like outpost institutions—gathering places for outsiders in the center of the city." These are the gathering places referred to here as the public sphere, which rely heavily on "face-to-face relationships of the personal network" (Liebow, 1967, p. vii).

Venkatesh's (2006) ethnography of an urban Chicago community described the informal economy's relationship to the rest of the city. Underground economies are part of a "parallel urban world" which developed mirror institutions to the mainstream. After the Civil Rights era forced integration and housing opportunities outside of urban centers, blight reigned and the alternate economy set up as a function of segregation continued to thrive. For those left behind, the underground economy

quickly became a primary economy as buying off-the-books goods became a pattern of survival.

The entrepreneurs are foundations of the community operating in a very different public sphere, exempt from yellow pages listings and business cards: they can be found in homes, on designated alleyways and street corners, and in bars and restaurants. Whether one is starting or sustaining a business, “underground” institutions provide a backbone for all aspects of local enterprise, from loans and credit to advertisement. The cash economy abuts a world where trading and payment occur through verbal promises, in-kind payments, and barter. (Venkatesh, 2006, p. 93)

Neal (1999) notes that the postindustrial underground economy also provided a source of patronage for the arts. Neal notes that one of the few black patrons of the “Harlem Renaissance” was West Indian numbers runner Casper Holstein, who helped finance the Urban Leagues literary awards in 1926 from his profits. Across the Atlantic in Nigeria, a similar “nocturnal economy” has thrived around juju music, which ebbed and flowed with the patronage of the oil economy. Economic factors, ranging from international oil prices to conflicts between captains and band boys, are a crucial aspect of urban Yoruba musical practice (Waterman 1990). This process led to the emergence of the first millionaire juju stars.

As the rich got richer, so the stars they patronized rose higher ... Well-placed band captains were able to accumulate theretofore unheard of amounts of cash for investment in musical and nonmusical enterprises (e.g. recording labels, hotels, construction firms, mill companies). In addition, those with contacts among the high elite gained access to smuggled electronic equipment, which, if bought within Nigeria, would have been exorbitantly expensive. The size of most popular bands increased from around ten performers in the mid-1960s to fifteen or more in the mid-1970s.” (Waterman, 1990, p. 116)

In the U.S. there were two factors that similarly impacted the nature of the informal economy of the Black Public Sphere in the post- Civil Rights era. The first is the intensity of the economic collapse of the industrial urban economy, which produced mass unemployment. The second was the emergence of crack, an illegal drug that is perhaps the most destructive element to emerge within the contemporary Black Public Sphere (Neal, 1999, p. 132). For H Street (like U Street) it was the 1968 riots that engulfed the economic corridor following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **H Street**

**Customer:** You got BMG?

**Customer:** This not a bootleg copy is it?

**Nico:** We don't sell bootleg.

**Customer:** Sorry about that.

**Nico:** It's not a problem. I'm glad you asked. That way I could answer.

Nico has sold live go-go recordings, also known as "PAs" around Hains Point and other federal parks, and outside schools. He's sold outside Chinese food takeout spots frequented by drug dealers until the wee hours of the morning. He's navigated dueling drug turfs, been caught in the crosshairs of drug enforcement agents who twice mistook him for a dealer. He's confronted imposters selling tapes under his name and fought them hand-to-hand. Nico has never, for the record, been a bootlegger. "It really bothered me to dub somebody else's work to sell it. The kind of business I'm in its kind of crazy to have a conscience but I did."

Building the business was a painstaking process. At the time he started out in the business in the early 1990s, he'd already had a complicated life. He'd been estranged from his mother, lived in a foster home, reconciled with an absent father, parted ways with his father and then spent a few months as a homeless high school student. He did a three-year stint in the military. While he was away, go-go was something that sustained him. He kept up with the world back home through recordings of the radio and concerts, much the way Chuck D described in his description of rap as a "Black CNN."

Upon returning to DC, a broken vertebra forced him to leave his job as a cook at a law firm. So he began wandering the city with a boom box and a rolling suitcase filled with P.A. tapes. Nico eventually got a license, then slowly built up the business and his reputation.

I got a little small table. I graduated to building a stand. We built this outrageous stand that was built with a car system in it car speakers. It was state of the art for the time. BET, City Paper [all did features on him.] Matter of fact Spin magazine put me in as if you want to [hear go-go music]. I'm not even a store. They said come see Nico's tapes at 12<sup>th</sup> and F. It got to be real big ... from '93 to 2000. So that's seven years.

Nico said when he pulled up in his tricked-out Ford Aerostar van, or his other weekly car rentals, customers used to pull up to him "like I was the ice cream man."

I liked being outside. I loved it. Actually more so than [being inside.]... We used to order snowsuits from an outerwear company. They were professional snowsuits. Like you would see guys working on manholes. They were for working at 30 below. We'd be hot. Everybody out there freezing, these body suits from head to toe. We were straight. All we needed was some gloves and a hat. We could be butt-naked under them joints and be straight.

Nico became a phenomenon. He was living fast, spending all his money instead of investing it. He was making “oodles and oodles of money.” Up to \$500-1,000 per day, money he now wishes he’d have invested in buying a home instead of renting flashy cars and “living fast.” In 2001, he ran into “the drama.” On his way to a show he was promoting in Virginia, a fire tore through his van, ruining his inventory of thousands of tapes. Luckily, he still had the master recordings in storage. But losing his entire inventory was a blow that took years to recover from. He had several less-than satisfying experiences selling wholesale and being in other independent music stores. He’d been working at Ben’s Chili Bowl for the past three years, where he occasionally sold recordings on the side.

At the time Nico and I talked, he was on the verge of turning 40. I asked him if he could get a license today in spite of the push from city officials to limit street vending licenses. “Yeah!” he said without hesitation. “In a minute! In a minute. I’m telling you.” He reentered the scene at the February 2006 after being hired by the owner of I-Hip-Hop and Go-Go to manage his second retail store in the District. The owner Derrick also owned the clothing store Planet Chocolate City located on Georgia Avenue N.W.

### **Evolving Cultural Technologies**

By 2005, Nico operated at a time when the business model for the P.A. industry had begun to shift. I asked him about a *Washington City Paper* article that was published the previous fall, which talked about why go-go bands are deciding to

release fewer live recordings (Godfrey, 2005). Bands told the reporter that they decided that the recordings were being pirated too often by fans and bootleggers alike, and they felt exploited by the whole industry. Live releases, once a weekly affair for most go-go bands, are trickling down to once or twice a year among the most popular bands. They have begun to cut out middlemen like Nico. Naturally, Nico believed it was a mistake:

Back when they were putting out tapes every week, it was a more profitable game for everybody. It made their shows hotter. But I guess now, people still go to the shows. Shows always going to be the bloodline of the city, of go-go. People want to hear their name. Why you think the lead talker of the show calling out the names of the crews all night? People want to hear their names! That's why they got signs up, and hand signs, they want to hear their name. So in order to hear it, other than just hear it that time that night. They want to hear it on a tape or a CD. So if it don't come out, they disappointed. So you are disappointing your clientele.

### **A Shrinking Black Space**

A black lesbian couple walked into the H Street store. They've picked up a couple of CDs that they had ordered and now they are looking for something else to buy. Nico suggests the latest CD by the major-label R&B artist Christina Milian. One of the women balks.

"She's from the area," Nico points out, alluding to the early years that the Jersey-born singer of Afro-Cuban descent spent living in Waldorf, Maryland.

"She from the *white* part," the customer says.

"This about to be the white part too!" Nico replies, gesturing around him and gentrifying street beyond the glass wall.

Nico had seen the change at Ben's Chili Bowl, where he worked his other job. The restaurant is an iconic symbol of black resilience for staying open after race riots burned both the U Street and this corridors following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King. Ten years ago, U Street had a similar feel to H Street. Today, though it is filled with exorbitantly priced luxury housing, and hip-new restaurants. Ben's Chili Bowl remains a proud symbol of black Washington, but today has equal numbers of white and black patrons. It is no longer a "black space."

From an early age, Nico made the decision that he preferred to be in "black spaces." When Nico was 13, he refused to follow his mother to a job in Alaska—most certainly out of his element. He decided to stay in Washington and fend for himself.

I think what really changed my life was going into a foster home—actually a shelter home. And then some white folks wanted to adopt me. But I refused. I wanted a black family....Yeah, they wanted to keep me. I said, 'naw, that's alright.' I didn't want to be raised listening to Foreigner, Journey and Def Leopard all my life.

These comments reflect how deeply race and music shape virtually every aspect of his life. Washington has been overwhelmingly black for all of Nico's 39 years. His comments reflect an alienation and limited intimate knowledge of white culture. This knowledge isn't as necessary when you live in a black world like Nico does. When my sister visits DC she likes to call it "black privilege"—a sense of entitlement and racial arrogance that fills the atmosphere in DC This is a rarity in a country where blacks comprise roughly 13 percent of the population. It has been the case for most of Washington's history.



White spaces and black spaces have each been constructed separately and linked to disproportionate levels of race and power, as the cultural anthropologist Price (1999) pointed out in her study of Washington, DC. This political reality has had palpable effects on the psyche of black Washington. Price believes the cause of many of the city's social ills stem from the colonial relationship with the federal government and the historical ambivalence that body has had with the city's majority black residents. She describes the psychological barriers erected around the "white spaces" associated with federal Washington, and the "black spaces" that comprise most residential areas.

Leibow (1967) described Washington, D.C.'s unique racial exchange that took place in the 1960s. The city has been a principal stopping place for blacks moving up the Eastern seaboard out of the Carolinas, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia. He noted that in 1963 Washington was the only major American city in the country with more blacks than whites living in it. He noted the exchange between them during the work week: "The city gives up Negro women to the suburbs where they work as domestics, and receives, in exchange, white white-collar men. At the end of the workday, city and suburbs reclaim their own" (Leibow, 1967, p. 17).

At the time of my ethnographic fieldwork on H Street, the corridor was at the beginning stages of gentrification and it was a popular subtext to discussions in and around the store. When I went across the street to the Cluck-U Chicken for a lunch break, the owner Bernard Gibson was there, tongue-lashing his employees to give me better customer service. A petition sat near the register, asking the community to support his battle with the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) that

wants to withdraw his license because it is not a “sit-down” restaurant as the zoning certificate allowed, but a fast-food joint. I was skeptical that an ANC would target a business, especially one so immaculately kept, that in fact, had chinaware and table service for patrons. I assumed there was something else to it that he wasn’t disclosing in the petition, so I ordered my food and ate without signing it.

A few weeks later, Gibson’s account of the battle was confirmed in an article in *The Washington Post*. “Whose H Street Is It Anyway?; Dispute Over Restaurant Zoning Creates a Chasm Between Northeast Washington’s Old and New Residents.”

“H Street in Northeast Washington is a strip trying to shed its bedraggled past and become a gleaming urban paradise” (Schwartzman, 2006). Property values in the area have taken off, detailed in countless media accounts. The developer Jim Abdo recently spent \$27 million to buy the old Capital Children's Museum seven blocks from the music store. The developer planned to restore the 1870 building that once housed a convent to create 480 housing units of mostly upscale condos. The 1938 Atlas Theater, in the 1300 block of H Street was being restored as a performing-arts center (Meyer, 2005).

The perceived encroachment by gentrifiers was a constant subtext to many of the discussions in the music store. Cluck-U-Chicken owner Bernard Gibson stopped by Nico’s store to chat in hushed tones. Nico’s off-hand comment to the customer reflected the widespread feeling of the inevitable. That a “black” space could collide with a “white” space without one of them collapsing is almost inconceivable.

## Meeting of the Spheres, Part I

I joined Nico as he celebrated his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday in October 2006, at another club on H Street called Phish Tea Café, where the go-go band Familiar Faces had a regular Wednesday night gig. I brought my DVD camcorder and digital camera to record the show. Several months earlier I had told Nico about a white graduate student in folklore who called himself Funk Master J, who had been blogging with detailed information about all of the Familiar Faces shows. I was pleased to finally meet him in person on the night of Nico's birthday. Nico was automatically suspicious of J. As soon as we walked outside, Nico grilled Jordan, a 30-something white man, about his intentions. He seemed most peeved that this outsider was using another public sphere—the Internet as a forum to represent the go-go community. The following is a transcript of a portion of the exchange, which I also captured on DVD.

Nico: Right. But if you gon' do a blog, and you trying to reach, obviously millions of people. Why would you keep it in first-person?

J: But I'm not trying to reach....that was never my intention.

Nico: But I mean, that's what it's *doing* right?

J: Yeah, but that was never my intention.

Nico: Why wouldn't it be your intention, if...you blogging, you're online, so anybody can see what you're doing. Reason why I ask you that is because go-go is a fragile art right now. And reason being, because it has only itself to stand on. Nobody is trying to support it. Other than the people that's involved in it. Patrons and the artists. Alright. Outside of that, there's a lot of detractors. So I personally, not calling myself the go-go police...but I personally am questioning anybody who has any type of ...I take that back. Not saying you have them, but, anybody who possibly might have alternative motives.

Because I've dealt with those types of people. And it's been detrimental to the art itself.

On his blog the next day, Funkmaster J mentioned meeting Nico and me. He had the following take on the exchange:

I talked for a while with Natalie and Nico, one of her two colleagues. He asked me a number of questions about my blog saying, "GoGo is really fragile right now (which I know and is a shame) and I've known a lot of whites who have said they were trying to help GoGo and have hurt it". I found some of his questions a little strange like, "Why did you decide to write the blog in first person?" I understand his concern, it's a damned shame that authorities are trying to eliminate GoGo.

As Jackson (2001) notes, all communities police the symbolic boundaries that surround them. However, this exchange also represents the collusion of cultural codes. A communication took place, but there were several crossed signals. From Nico, it was suspicion about J's intentions and motives for writing authoritatively in the public sphere about a community of which Nico didn't consider him a member. This grilling he gave to Jay was no different than the grilling Nico gave me before agreeing to be a part of my project.

I put down the video camera and I tried to ease the tension. Nico said to me, with a little bit of annoyance, "I'm doing this for you!" I told Nico that it was OK; I didn't see Jay as a rival but a colleague. In recounting the incident on his blog, Jay automatically inserted the racial subtext which might have been implied, but which Nico never brought up directly. He also assumed Nico was talking about "white authorities" who were trying to eliminate go-go. What Nico was actually troubled by was outsiders speaking "for" go-go in the public realm, which had in the past not gone well. The British entertainment mogul Chris Blackwell of Island Records made

the 1986 film *Good to Go*, (later known as *Short Fuse*) which was widely considered a cartoonish, insulting depiction of the go-go community and Washington, D.C. as a whole. Lornell & Stephenson detail the struggle over the making of the movie in which a black co-director was fired, allowing a white British writer-director to complete the project. There were also two white Georgetown students who did a 2001 documentary on go-go called “The Pocket” which was more flattering. However, Nico was peeved because he helped out the filmmakers yet never saw the documentary itself.

### **Meeting of the Spheres, Part II**

Another experience also highlighted the vast boundaries of various public spheres. About midway through my several sessions with Nico, my ethnomusicology professor agreed to have a meeting with Nico at the University of Maryland’s Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. I wanted us to talk about the process of digitizing Nico’s archive, as well as advice for pursuing grant funding to make his collection available to scholars. Dr. Jonathan Dueck, the ethnomusicology professor, invited another doctoral student who has done extensive archival work for the Smithsonian, to advise us in this process. I hoped to be able to get Nico some funding to do the important cultural archival work he’s already been financing on his own as a way to give greater visibility to go-go and access to primary source materials. I saw this as a way to give back to the many hours he spent helping me on my project. The following are my field notes of the experience:

*Walking into the huge, vast, 30-plus foot ceilings arts complex with Nico, I realized how white my daytime world is. There were really only young white kids milling around. I had/have similar culture shock when I first started going to go-gos, or even when I first arrived in DC as a college freshman. It was a reminder of all these cultural worlds sharing the same space. Nico actually lives a few miles away in Mt. Rainier. If he can experience this culture shock, maybe he would understand what it is like for me to move in and out of go-go, a psychological and cultural boundary I cross every day.*

*When we got into the ethnomusicology lab with sound and other kinds of engineering equipment, Dr. Dueck offered Nico a seat near the door. Nico declined the seat, explaining that he never sits with his back to the door, and took another seat. When we realize we left something in the car, Nico looked over at me pleadingly to walk with him back to his car to retrieve it. When Nico arrived at his silver SUV, he grabbed a bandana to put on top of his braids. "I didn't realize I was looking that rough," Nico told me with a laugh.*

*When we got back to the ethnomusicology lab, Nico pointed out all the equipment that he was already familiar with. When the audio expert, who has done archival work at the Smithsonian, quizzed him about how he's storing his master copies and what kind of techniques he uses to copy them, we learned that Nico has already been pretty much doing it correctly all these years. Amazing because he is completely self-taught. What all those degrees and resources at their disposal, Nico was able to get to a similar place.*

*They told us we were only supposed to get 30 minutes, but much to both my and Nico's delight, they we talked for nearly three hours.*

*As I was walking Nico out to his car. We were talking about what the next step is. I passed on the pointers that Dueck gave about grant writing, building a budget, etc. So we were talking and Nico said what is the crux of my dissertation. I was telling him about how I view go-go as a cultural artifact for DC and the lives and people that live in it, he agreed. "Go-go is not like other music," Nico said. "It is what's happening."*

*"What's happening" I thought. That's a pretty good definition of news.*

## **Oral History**

Even if another single go-go performance is not recorded, Nico's collection already contains thousands of tapes, forming a rich archive of events, controversies,

people, lives and deaths that have occurred over the past 25 years—much like Nexis-Lexis. Nico’s status as chief historian and archivist of go-go highlight the nature of this particular black public sphere which updates previous African-derived expressive forms in which cultural capital is stored in the oral tradition. The West African “griot” figure that goes from village to village peddling stories and collecting new ones. The griot knows all the town gossip and historical events, serving as a living archive of his people’s traditions (Bebey, 1969; Nketia, 1974). The drummer similarly must have a command of oral literature, history, and the by-names and praise names of each person so he can chant them during the African music performance (Bebey, 1969; Nketia, 1974). In Echeruo’s (1977) Victorian-era Lagos, Nigeria, drummers were entrusted with the task of maintaining the historical record. Also, he forms a similar function to hip-hop deejays that must have a command of an archive of musical recordings to draw from in the sampling process.

Nico’s collection contains a social history and narrative not readily accessible at the District of Columbia public library, the DC Historical Society, or the Smithsonian Institution. Each recording in Nico’s collection is carefully documented and labeled. On the back wall of the store, customers could pick up recording of the 5/26/1991 show, when West Coast rapper Ice Cube and Yo-Yo performed with Junkyard band at Triples nightclub. There was the show recorded when the Northeast Groovers performed at Lorton penitentiary. There was the oft-cited classic show of Rare Essence on 7-9- 1985 at the Panorama Room, known to most as “The Fight Joint.” The recording captured a physical altercation between the lead talker and the bass player, which the band continued to play throughout.

Customers can buy the show recorded on 5-5-1994, the night that changed the go-go sound forever. Ghenghis, lead talker of Backyard Band had just been released from jail after a several-months-long hiatus on drug charges. He returned that night to the stage with a hero's welcome, and initiating a new generation of go-go bands who followed them in the rap-influenced "gansta" go-go genre. Then there is a show that three years later also represented a watershed for the city and go-go. Backyard Band was playing. Lead talker Ghenghis instructed club bouncers to throw out a fan who was causing trouble. He went outside and shot off-duty police officer Brian Gibson on February 4, 1997. It was a critical moment in the mediation of go-go, when its reputation as an incubator for violence was cemented. The Ibex, a club located in the Petworth neighborhood in Northwest Washington was closed (and early in 2006, was being renovated into luxury lofts.)

Other recordings captured the key debates and controversies that captivated black neighborhoods in the city. There was a series of battles between rappers, while Rare Essence played in the background in 1988. Fat Rodney, a known drug dealer, battled against a rapper known as DC Scorpio, a strident opponent of drugs. A series of recordings chronicle their onstage battles, which mirrored the battles going on in the streets of Washington.

**Nico:** Rodney used to kill him. Because Rodney was street. Scorpio had a lot of scripted kinds of things that he used to say that was really wack for real....[Later on] Fat Rodney got killed. As a matter of fact he got killed coming out of the go-go. I do have that tape. I never put it on CD. 6-9-1989. He was coming out of a go-go. They gunned him down. As he was coming out.



**Natalie:** What about DC Scorpio, what happened to him?

**Nico:** Actually he came back. He came back in '90, '89. He was gone for a couple years, he said went to college or something. He tried to make a return but he wasn't the same. He never came out with another hit record. Rap had changed....A couple years back, he put out a full release rap album that didn't do nothing. It was promoted to do something but nobody was feeling Scorpio. He could actually rap, but it was the content of the rap.

**Natalie:** People thought it was corny?

**Nico:** Yeah. [laughs]. And the wild thing about it, he tried to come back with this rap album, he tried to come back hard.

**Natalie:** Yeah, they usually do.

Nico and I still hope to collaborate on a project to donate a portion of his collection to an archive where they can be preserved in perpetuity. Until then, the collections will live on at places like the H Street store in neighborhoods depicted by the local corporate media as an urban wasteland. Even if another go-go is not recorded, the collection will be there forever, maintained by people like Nico and countless other collectors quietly amassing archives of these cultural artifacts in private collections all over the city—and beyond.

By Spring of 2007—a year after we first met—Nico had undergone some major changes in his life. He had gotten married, and joined the staff of Take Me Out to the Go-Go Magazine, where he wrote a column called “Nico’s Niche” by Nico the Go-goOlogist.” He also left his job as a manager of the H Street store and began distributing his collection at Iverson Mall in Prince George’s County. He also started managing a go-go band named Suttle. For the first time, he would live and work

outside the District of Columbia city limits where the black public sphere is continually shifting. He would be selling his wares at a store in Iverson Mall, just outside the District in Prince George's County. He also left his job at Ben's Chili Bowl. Like the a good part of the rest of the go-go community, including live performances venues and mom & pop stores, his reality has shifted outside the District. He was regretful but excited about his future at Iverson Mall, which he said was a "very high profile" location.

On one of my last visits to the store in Spring 2006, a customer who looked to be in his late 40s to early 50s walked into the store. He asked Nico if he had any old-school Rare Essence, "anything from '80 to '85."

**Nico:**....It's not like this is my whole collection right here. I got a lot of stuff. For me to put everything on CD, I would have to take a year out of my life.

**Customer:** All right, there is one in particular I'm looking for. Luther with Rare Essence in '91. Hitting that Luke, "I Wanna Hit it Good to You." Mike and Luther. Know what I'm talking about?

**Nico:** That was '89 or '90.... Definitely that was '90.

**Customer:** Got that up there?

**Nico:** I got that on tape. I know I got that on tape. It wasn't that significant a show to me...

**Customer:** You got Highland in '92?

**Nico:** I was just telling her [Natalie] about that show. That was the first time they had gotten back together in years! Funk, Benny, Jungle Boogie, even DC was there.

**Customer:** For real? I don't mean to interrupt you, man.

**Nico:** That's all right. This is business, baby. We gon' take care of business. You all right. You here, I'ma take care of you. Anything else you looking for?

Chapter 6: 1986: Drumming the News



The album cover for a Rare Essence 1986 recording. Illustration 4.

## OVERVIEW

The following transcription is of a 1986 Rare Essence P.A. tape, a seminal go-go recording, according to several research partners including Nico and Kato. It was recorded sometime in early 1986 at a club in Northeast Washington. Two decades later it continues to be referenced and traded online. The year 1986 marked a watershed in the Golden Age of Go-Go, with the release of a major motion picture (*Good to Go*) and several bands being signed to national recording companies. The mid-1980s in general are the period in which go-go musicians and industry began its divergent path from hip-hop. The significance of this year was also established by several anthropologists, sociologists, and media researchers as being a watershed year in the life of the so-called “War on Drugs” waged in federal Washington (Shoemaker, 1989; Reinerman & Levine, 1997; Miller, 1992; Orcutt & Turner, 1993).

The media frenzy over drugs was fueled by the cocaine overdose death of Washington-area native and University of Maryland basketball star Len Bias. Bias died as a result of a cocaine overdose the night after he was drafted to the NBA to play for the Boston Celtics. Bias also happened to be a huge Rare Essence fan according to several former friends.

In a study of the local black press, I found that aside from a single photo and caption of Chuck Brown, *Washington Afro American* newspaper carried no coverage of go-go in 1986 (Hopkinson, 2006). Thus by 1986, go-go as a separate, parallel communication channel to the bourgeois-oriented black press of Washington, D.C. This recording tells the story of the time, 1986, when bottles of champagne began to

pop as the drug economy was poised to boom in Washington, D.C., preceding its rise as the Murder Capital. The following is a transcription of this 1986 Rare Essence Recording, where we see a number of key newsmakers emerge in what Venkatesh (2006) called an off the books, underground economy.

## Transcription

Rare Essence<sup>2</sup>: Live at Breeze's Metro Club<sup>3</sup>

"The Album that Kept the Whole Neighborhood Rockin'"<sup>4</sup>

1986<sup>5</sup> Kolossal Records<sup>6</sup>

Transcription by "Al"<sup>7</sup>

(BEAT: ROLL CALL<sup>8</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup> Rare Essence, known as the "wickedest band alive," was founded by a group of St. Thomas More Catholic School children in Southeast Washington in 1976 (Wartofsky, 2003; Wartofsky, 2001). The band has been a staple of go-go scene ever since. Despite the rotation of most the roster, Rare Essence remains one of the best brands in go-go outside of Chuck Brown. They began as funk influenced top-40 band and then adapted to the go-go sound created and popularized by Chuck Brown as an alternative to disco.

<sup>3</sup> Breeze's Metro Club is located at 2335 Bladensburg Rd. NE, Washington, D.C. Longtime proprietor "Hollywood Breeze" also known as Daniel Clayton owned and operated the nightclub for the better part of three decades. It was later known as Deno's. As of this writing in 2007, it continued to host go-gos.

<sup>4</sup> This album is deeply established in the canon of go-go, according to several of my research partners. It is also continues to be referenced and traded online.

<sup>5</sup> The year 1986 was a crucial, pivotal year in the life of go-go as a whole. The authors Lornell & Stephenson cite 1986 as the year go-go experienced "perhaps its greatest popularity" (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001, p.146). This was the year that the major motion picture "Good To Go," was released nationally by the international music conglomerate Island Records as a vehicle to take go-go to the mainstream. The year 1986 was the juncture in which hip-hop and go-go were developing on parallel planes. Both were inner-city musical forms whose future viability was uncertain. "Go-go is here to stay," Warren Doles a 17-year-old Northeast Washington resident told the *Washington Post* in 1986 at a go-go concert. "Go-go was born here, I don't know how long rap is going to be around" (Harris, L.V., 1986).

In a previous study, I examined all of the news coverage in the *Washington Afro-American* newspapers in the year 1986. I found that this establishment local black newspaper all but ignored go-go despite it being its breakout year—highlighting the class distinctions among ethnic media covering Washington, D.C. and establish go-go as a separate, parallel communication channel even within the black community (Hopkinson, 2006). The socioeconomic fragmentation of Washington's black community is a theme throughout virtually all of my ethnographic and journalistic interviews related to go-go.

<sup>6</sup> Kolossal Records was a late 1980s go-go label based in Suitland, Md. that released this now-classic record.

<sup>7</sup> "Al" is a research partner whom I hired to do the transcriptions and interviewed about his experiences at the show. At the time of the 1986 performance, Al was as an 18-year-old high school student. One of his middle school teachers, JB, was one of the band members performing with Rare Essence at this show.

Jas. Funk<sup>9</sup>:

All they rolling now y'all,  
Special dedication, going out to the whole Washington, D.C. crew.  
Yes, indeed, we love all of you.  
Big Brother<sup>10</sup> KT and all the rest of the friends.  
My main man Duck and all the Dom Perignon Crew<sup>11</sup>  
Yeah Houseman and all the friends,  
Yeah, roll that tape man<sup>12</sup>  
Do it for Big Brother Wayne out of Langdon Park<sup>13</sup>, y'all.

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<sup>8</sup> The "Roll Call" beat is a rhythm done when the lead talker surveys who is there. This is one of the cultural traditions that link go-go to the school systems. The other tradition is the music programs in the school system and the city's marching band tradition which provided a steady supply of musicians (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001)

<sup>9</sup> Jas. Funk, also known as James "Funk" Thomas is the lead talker for Rare Essence, considered one of the greatest lead talkers of all time. His mother Annie "Miss Mack" Thomas was the longtime manager for Rare Essence. Funk's brother, Quentin "Footz" Davidson was also on stage at this 1986 performance, where he did percussion. Jas. and Footz were in elementary school when they started rehearsing in the basement of their home on Xenia Street, SE. (Wartofsky, 2003). In 1986, Funk was in and out of rehab for drug addiction. The artist was later lauded for his outspokenness about his struggle overcoming drug addiction at a time when substance abuse plagued many in the city (Nelson, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Funk uses the appellation "Big Brother" throughout this recording to various fans as a sign of affection and respect.

<sup>11</sup> The Dom Perignon crew was a well-known local crew and major patrons of go-go. The crew took the name of Dom Perignon the French champagne brand named for, a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk who created a brand of sparkling wine (champagne) that also came to be a symbol of the excess of the 1980s. Dom Perignon was considered the best champagne and in 1986, it often sold for more than \$100 per bottle (Ringle, 1986).

According to DJ Renegade, who was a prominent deejay in D.C. clubs at the time, D.C. club goers started ordering Dom Perignon champagne in 1986. "We had these drug dealers this was like '86 and this was crack....D.C. was still relatively wide open at that point. Within six months, kids were getting shot in D.C., I would get \$50 a mix-tape. [Another major go-go deejay] used to get \$100 a mix-tape. It had to be drug dealers. Who else had that kind of money? We went from 5 [dollars] to 7 to 10 to get in [to the club] The comparable go-go club was the Black Hole, Breeze's Metro Club—was like a little joint in terms of square footage. All the clubs were making money." (Personal communication, 2005)

<sup>12</sup> This was a hint to the audience that the show was going to be recorded. Often when the show is recorded fans try even harder, by moving to the front of the stage, and jumping up throughout the performance to be acknowledged by the lead talker and have their presence at the show recorded for posterity. Go-Go Nico describes being immortalized on a go-go recording as being every Washingtonian's "birthright." (Personal communication, 2006)

<sup>13</sup> Langdon Park is a working-class neighborhood in Northeast Washington located near the Washington Arboretum with the main arteries of New York Avenue and Bladensburg Road. This is the



Special dedication going out to Jazzy Jeff and friends  
Yes indeed, and all our friends, Big Brother Winston,  
I said every time we blend, it gets better again and again,  
I said every time we blend y'all, we meet new friends  
(REPEAT 2X'S)

So if we leave anything anybody out,  
Just come down front and scream and shout  
Cause we wanna make sure that y'all turns it out now

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neighborhood where Breeze's Metro Club is located. The neighborhood is in red in the map that follows.

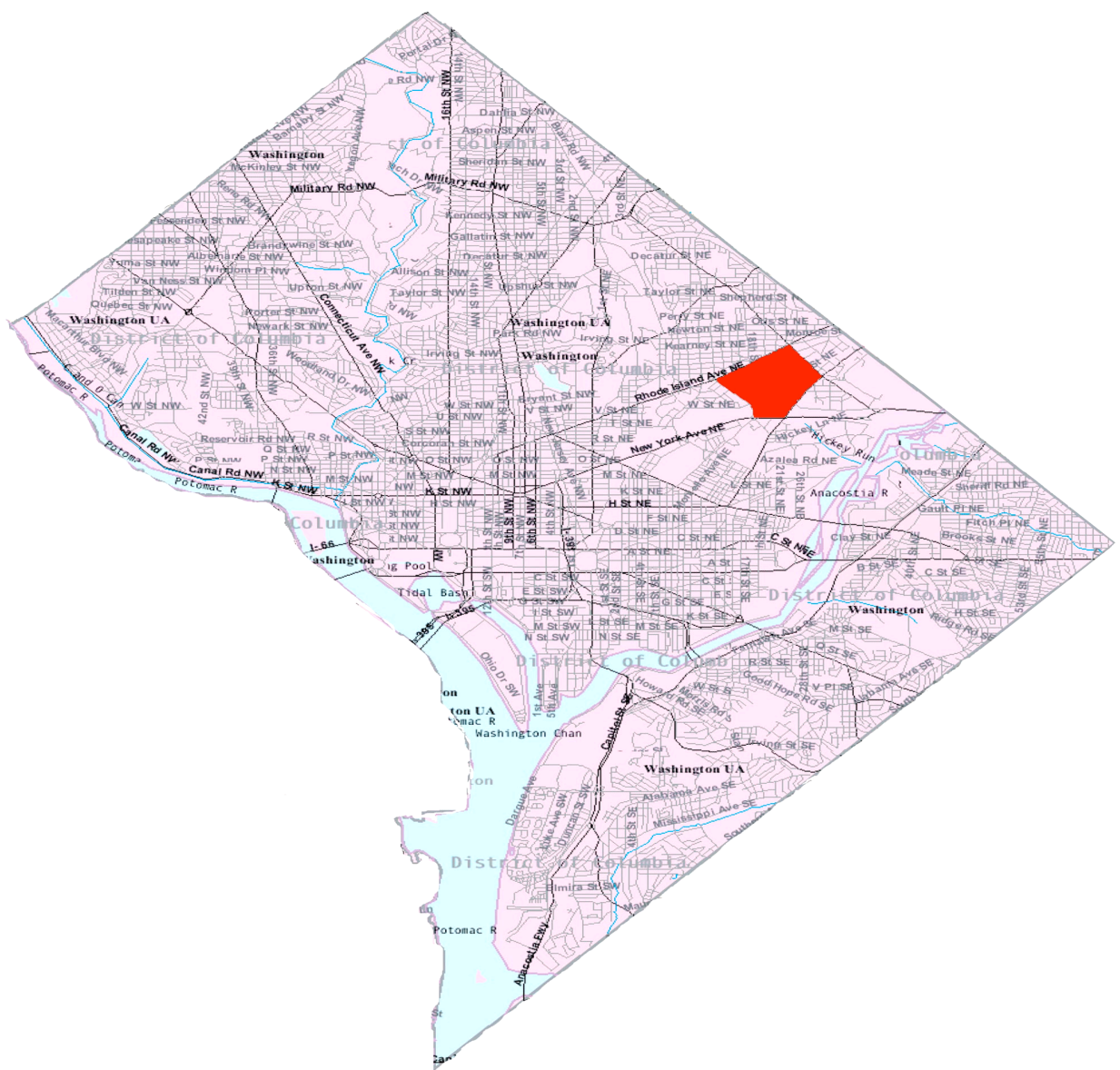


Illustration 5.

(REPEAT 2X'S)

JAS FUNK: I said hello?

CROWD RESPONSE: HELLO,HELLO,HELLO

JAS FUNK: Welcome back to the Metro

(REPEAT 4X'S)

ROLL CALL:

We got Tammy and Devon y'all

Sheila & Monica<sup>14</sup> y'all

Tammy & Lisa

TC & Stacy y'all

Tracy & Googie<sup>15</sup> y'all

Lisa of the World y'all<sup>16</sup>

Supa Dupa Cooper, we got the whole darn crew in the house tonight

We got Duck & Nuno

We got Cle & Rio

We got Boomie & King Tut<sup>17</sup>

We got all that DP crew<sup>18</sup>

We got all that DP crew

We got Lisa of the World

We got Tonya & Junior, y'all

We got Lisa & Deenie, y'all

We got the whole darn crew in the house tonight, all do it

We got a lady by the name of Yvette, and she's the prettiest I've seen yet.

We got Lisa & Precious Pen

And sweet lady Lucious Lynn

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<sup>14</sup> Al recalls that first Tammy and Devon were known as the TM Crew. Then Sheila joined but they were still known as the TM crew, by which Funk refers to them throughout this recording.

<sup>15</sup> Googie was the sound engineer for Rare Essence.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa of the World was a go-go fan and a graffiti artist. During the 1980s Lisa of the World's tag was ubiquitous, according to Al. She used to magic marker from "The Hill" behind Maryland Avenue, behind Langston Terrace, on the Union Station Bridge, on buses, on buildings. The magic marker graffiti was a fad in 1986, Al says. Lisa of the World would be acknowledged the *Washington Post* five years after this show in a profile of another famous graffiti writer, Disco Dan. (Hendrickson, 1991)

<sup>17</sup> The previous four call names were members of the DP, or Dom Perignon crew.

<sup>18</sup> It was always a struggle to get a shout out, even harder when a show was recorded as an album. Some lead talkers were known to remember names of fans that provided them with other kinds of illicit party favors popular at the time.

Sweet Lil Lady Sydnee & Sweet Lady Sheila  
May main man Pee Wee Herman<sup>19</sup> & Archie & Jeff & Tony  
We got Big Brother Wayne, y'all from out of Langdon Park  
We got Sexy Sax y'all & Big Brother Ellis too.  
007 & the Darnell Crew  
Hi-C ya'll they from that Largo<sup>20</sup> crew  
We got Winston & Daria  
We got my main man Dynamite Darnell, Yeah, he shonuff well  
We got her & Samantha y'all  
Big Brother Bob & Nell  
We gotta Sweet lil' lady name Darnell outta Old Town Virginia<sup>21</sup>, all do it

(CROWD CHANTING: WIND ME UP FUNK)

JAS FUNK:

DO WHAT NOW? (CHANT)

DO WHAT BABY? (CHANT)

WHAT U WANT ME TO DO? (CHANT)

CAUSE I SURE HEAR YOU? (CHANT)

WHAT U WANT ME TO DO? (CHANT)

We got my main man Keith, y'all, outta Special K Productions<sup>22</sup>  
We got Big Brother Flood & Duck & Snacks too  
We got Tony & Tom y'all, Keith & Tina, y'all  
We got Sheila & Shirley  
We got Wanda & Lisa of the World  
We got Monica & Monie  
We got Rizzio & Go-Go John  
We got Jazzy Jeff y'all & Sweet Devon

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<sup>19</sup> Sometimes, if the lead talker didn't know your name, he'd give you one. "Pee Wee" was the name Funk gave to a fan that used to dance a lot. Rare Essence often played a version of the Pee Wee Herman dance and song, taken from a popular children's show Pee Wee's Playhouse, a spin-off of a 1985 film which aired on television from 1986 to 1991. This practice of assigning names and by-names rooted in history or culture is also found in Chernoff's (1997) discussion of the Dagbamba of Ghana.

<sup>20</sup> Largo is a city in Prince George's County, Maryland, which is on the eastern border of Washington, D.C. In 1986, Prince George's was just beginning its transformation from a rural, sleepy area dominated by white residents to the wealthiest majority black jurisdiction in the U.S.

<sup>21</sup> Old Town is the oldest part of Alexandria, Virginia, established in 1779, it is located across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. and was originally part of the District.

<sup>22</sup> Special K Productions was a popular promoter.

We got that sweet Felicia, sweet Monina, Sweet Nita  
We got the whole darn crew in the house tonight all do it

We got to do it one time for my main man Hollywood Breeze  
For lettin' us come over here and rock n roll each and every Thursday night.  
Ladies and gentlemen, thanks so much Breeze,  
And also going out to my main man Big Brother Skip and Big Brother Norm  
And Big Brother Bug and Pittsburgh Slim on the Camera Stand<sup>23</sup>  
Freakbody on the turntables and,  
Big Brother Rerun, put in a lil' fun, say what y'all

(CROWD CHANTING: WIND ME UP FUNK)

JAS FUNK:

DO WHAT NOW? (CHANT)  
I DONT BELIEVE MY EARS? (CHANT)  
WHAT AM I HEARING? (CHANT)  
WHAT DID I HEAR? (CHANT)  
I DONT BELIEVE MY EARS? (CHANT)

Now did I leave, say what?  
Did I leave anybody out?  
(REPEAT 4X'S)

JAS FUNK: We left out? (REPEAT 16X'S)

(CROWD RESPONSE: [EVERYTIME FUNK SAY WE LEFT OUT, A CROWD  
MEMBER SAYS HIS/HER NAME])

Everybody from Uptown<sup>24</sup>, everybody from downtown, cross-town, outta town, yes  
indeed  
We love you too, outta sight.  
Big Brother Kevin outta Prophecy Band<sup>25</sup> too  
Say what now,  
Do it like this,  
Then do it like that  
Do it like this,  
And then do it like that,  
You say do it like this,  
And then do it like that,

---

<sup>23</sup> This would be the Polaroid camera stand—a longstanding go-go tradition discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>24</sup> Uptown is known as the northern part of the city, mostly upper Northwest east of 16<sup>th</sup> St. including Georgia Avenue, Brightwood, and Petworth neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.

<sup>25</sup> Prophecy Band was a go-go act formed by several Oxon Hill High School students (Ward, undated).

(BEAT CHANGE)  
ONE ON ONE<sup>26</sup>

JAS FUNK:  
Is that Reggie? My goodness all the old band  
All the old crews up in here y'all  
My goodness, we sure feel good up here y'all  
Maverick Room Crew<sup>27</sup>  
Howard Theater<sup>28</sup>  
The DP Crew  
The TM Crew and the Metro Crew  
We love you too, say what now

When school was closed, we was good to go.  
We didn't wanna leave until we closed the show, shonuff  
(REPEAT 2X'S)

JAS FUNK: When school was closed, (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: It was good to go (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: Wed didn't wanna leave (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: Until we closed the show (CROWD REPEATS)  
(REPEAT 2X'S)

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<sup>26</sup> The "One on One" groove, is a rhythmic pattern that Al describes as his "all time favorite groove. They have always hit the 'One on One,' some version of it. All the call & response. Some parts of the One on One, he always asks for participation. One of the original beats with a little socket in it. No other band can play it—that would be like robbery." Other research partners have described the "One on One" being kind of a D.C. anthem. In an interview with former Rare Essence member Little Benny, Tmottgogo writer Mark Ward asked him to explain. "Actually, I think we probably named it the "One On One" because of the rolls that Footz did to bring us into the groove. Funk would hold up one finger on each hand, and we knew to play 'One On One' " (Ward, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> The Maverick Room was a go-go located at 4<sup>th</sup> and Rhode Island Avenue, Northeast. (Gregg 1982) Its name was borrowed by the poet Thomas Sayers Ellis for the title of his 2005 book of poems, which eventually earned him a prestigious Whiting Prize with an award of \$40,000. The transcriber Al said he was too young to go when it was at its height in the early 1980s.

<sup>28</sup> The Howard Theatre, located at 620 T Street, Northwest first opened in 1910 and served the city's black community for more than seven decades helping to launch the careers of musical greats such as Billy Eckstine, Pearl Bailey and the Clovers. Its history includes performances by Duke Ellington, Billy Daniels, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Fats Domino, Marvin Gaye, Laverne Baker and the Temptations (Trescott, 1985). The theater had a seating capacity of more than 1,200. After the 1968 riots devastated much of the neighborhood, the theater was closed in 1970. Its reopening in the mid-1970s was boosted by the emerging go-go scene including Rare Essence, Chuck Brown. (Cultural Tourism, D.C. 1999) The theater was closed in the early 1980s. As of this writing in 2007, the city is mulling several offers to develop the theatre into luxury housing and an entertainment district.

JAS FUNK: Now the school has reopened (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: We have returned (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: Gonna open them books (CROWD REPEATS)  
JAS FUNK: And really learn (CROWD REPEATS)  
(REPEAT 2X'S)

(AD LIBS)  
I been walking, been talking  
(CROWD SAY'S,GO HEAD 4X'S)  
I am groovin' cause DC got y'all moving  
(CROWD SAY'S,GO HEAD 4X'S)

I been thinking and also peepin'  
(CROWD SAY'S,GO HEAD 4X'S)

I can't be mumblin' cause I do hear something (CROWD SAY'S,GO HEAD 4X'S)

We want to tell you about the "One on One" (REPEAT 3X'S)

Hang in there Yvette, we see you baby  
Big Brother Moe Gentry<sup>29</sup> yes indeed  
Thank you so much for coming through man  
Some of that old Highland<sup>30</sup> crew y'all  
Some of the crew, grew up with us too

It's like Jack & Jill going up the hill to have a little fun  
On the way, he met the Metro Crew and he told them about the "One on One"  
It's like Jack & Jill going up the hill to have a little fun  
On the way he met the Godfather<sup>31</sup> and he told them about the (HE SAID)

(CROWD SING-A-LONG)  
If you been thinking about leaving home and going to Hollywood,  
It doesn't necessarily mean that you gonna be living good,  
You might get hungry, cold and weak and you may have to sleep outside,  
Then you feel like you been let down, then you crawl inside your pride.  
If you want to deal with the world you gotta love yourself,  
And once you learn to love yourself, you can love everybody else  
We done been all around and seen the rest  
But tonight we getting' down with the very best

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<sup>29</sup> Moe Gentry was the sound engineer for this show.

<sup>30</sup> Highland is a part of Southeast Washington off Wheeler Road.

<sup>31</sup> Godfather played keyboard.

And that's you, you, you and the DP crew

(CROWD CHANTING GO HEAD,GO HEAD)

JAS FUNK:

Let me tell you about "One on One" y'all, yes indeed  
Talking about Damon and all the rest  
Talking about Damon and all the rest of the stars and celebrities  
In the house with us this morning  
Let me tell you about the "One on One."  
Good to see you Outta Sight Mike

Here's a toast to the Boogie,  
I said here's a toast to the Boogie y'all  
(FADING OUT)

(BEAT CHANGE)

I MUST BE DREAMIN'

(FADING IN)

(CROWD SAYING: DO THE MICKEY)

JAS FUNK: Do what now? (CROWD RESPONSE)  
JAS FUNK: Do what Darnell? (CROWD RESPONSE)  
JAS FUNK: Make it well? (CROWD RESPONSE)  
JAS FUNK: Do what y'all? (CROWD RESPONSE)  
JAS FUNK: Do what now? (CROWD RESPONSE)  
JAS FUNK: Do what y'all? (CROWD RESPONSE)

[HORN SECTION PLAYING LEADING INTO NEW GROOVE]  
I MUST BE DREAMIN']

JAS FUNK: Gon do it for that Dom Perignon Crew:  
Duck, Rio, Nuno and all the gang y'all, yes indeed  
Big Brother Tony Lewis<sup>32</sup> is Rayful<sup>33</sup> here too man?

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<sup>32</sup> Tony Lewis was a business associate of Rayful Edmond. Police told the *Washington Post* that the combined drug network of Edmond and Lewis employed hundreds of people and brought in hundreds of pounds of almost pure cocaine into the District (Lewis and Horowitz, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> Rayful Edmonds received his first cocaine brick from his father in 1985 or 1986 (Davidson 1989). At the time of this Rare Essence performance, Edmonds was just beginning his ascent running perhaps the largest drug organizations in the history of Washington, which if it were legitimate would have been the city's fifth largest private enterprise (Davidson, 1989). Eleven years later, in 1997, Edmond would become the subject of a 60 Minutes television interview with him behind bars. Until his arrest in 1989 at age 24, he controlled a large amount of the D.C. drug trade (Cauvin, 2005). He brought in millions of dollars of Colombian cocaine each week from Los Angeles. The city's streets were awash in cocaine, and Edmond was flush with cash. He spent lavishly on cars and clothing and clubbing. He would drop thousands of dollars in boutiques or nightspots (Cauvin, 2005). In 2005, Edmonds was the

Yes indeed, Rayful and the fellas, thank you so much for coming through  
Big Brother Ray and Rodney<sup>34</sup> and all the gang

I said when I went into the dancehall, to see who I could see,  
All I could see getting down was some buddies and some fine honeys  
So I went on over to Honey, and ask her if I could dance,  
They said anything that moves you got to move it to

I said, I must be dreamin'  
We said, we must be dreamin'  
We said, we must be dreamin'  
We never felt this good before

Well the music was getting' stronger  
Can't you feel it in your feet,  
The crows getting' down everywhere y'all, as they groove  
And I believe what I'm saying, you or to come on through  
Because anything that moves you got to move your crew too

I SAID I MUST BE DREAMIN'  
WE SAID, WE MUST BE DREAMIN'  
WE SAID, WE MUST BE DREAMIN'  
WE NEVER FELT THIS GOOD BEFORE

(HORNS)<sup>35</sup>

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subject of a biopic film co-produced by Curtis "Curtbone" Chambers, owner of the urban wear line, ALL DAZ,

<sup>34</sup> Rodney Tyrone Martin was also known as "Fat Rodney" (Nelson, 1989) During a series of battles in the mid-1980s, Fat Rodney, one of the best known drug dealers in the city, squared off against DC Scorpio, a college boy who rapped about the evils of drugs. Over a period of several years, they squared off in a series of battles, backed by Rare Essence band. Several research partners say that from an artistic perspective, Fat Rodney won hands down. DC Scorpio's rhymes seemed too scripted and therefore not the authentic freestyle audiences came to expect. These recordings also tell the larger story of the Rayful Edmonds era that go-go chronicled to 1989, when millions of dollars in drug money circulated in the city because of a booming cocaine drug trade. This is the largest story in the city as it earned its title of "Murder Capital."

Ultimately, DC Scorpio won the war. Fat Rodney was gunned down as he left a go-go at a skating rink in Temple Hills, Md. in 1989, just as he was poised to release, "Busting Out," a record and video. (Nelson, 1989). At the WKYS Go-Go Awards on Nov. 19, 2006 at Constitution Hall, I met Fat Rodney's son whom I photographed wearing an R.I.P. t-shirt bearing an image of his father, with the phrase "Stuntin' Like My Daddy" which is an allusion to a 2006 radio hit by rap artist Lil' Wayne. Born in 1990 Rodney Jr. was in his mother's belly when his father was gunned down. At one point at the 2006 awards ceremony at Constitution Hall, host Ghenghis of Backyard Band welcomed Rodney Jr. onstage and led the audience in a moment of remembrance for Fat Rodney.



JAS FUNK:Crystal, you should smack my face girl  
You said I'm always forgettin' your name like that  
Who you bring with you Tony?  
Did you bring the rest of the fellas with you?  
Everything alright, Duck? Alright?

All y'all sure got that new dance up here, my goodness  
Almost time for that Go-Go Mickey stuff  
Y'all sure got that Cabbage Patch<sup>36</sup> going though, yes you do

Well let me tell you baby, things never slow you down  
Everyone's on the floor, lettin' it all hang out  
I just couldn't stand there and watch everybody scream and shout  
Because anything that moves you got to move it too,

I said I must be dreamin'  
I said I must be dreamin'  
I said we must be dreamin'  
We never felt this good before

(AD LIBS)

(BEAT CHANGE)

THE MEDLEY:FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Donnell Floyd was the original horn player from Rare Essence( 1983 to 2000) (Wartofsky, 2003) who played that night. In 2007, he was fronting his own band, Familiar Faces, one of the hottest bands in the city playing several nights a week.

<sup>36</sup> The "Cabbage Patch" was a go-go dance that several years later became a national dance craze. I remember being a teenager in Indianapolis and watching Black Entertainment Television personality Donnie Simpson on "Video Soul" recorded at BET studios in Washington, D.C., joking about learning how to do it. The Miami-based rap group the Gucci Crew released a song called "The Cabbage Patch" which gave directions on how to do it in 1987. The District's version of this and several other dances were different than when the dance went national.

<sup>37</sup> In 1983 the Ad Council and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (under the U.S. Department of Transportation - U.S. DOT) partnered to launch the Drunk Driving Prevention campaign. The campaign, with its tagline, "Drinking & Driving Can Kill A Friendship," was originally designed to reach 16-24 year-olds, who accounted for 42% of all fatal alcohol-related car crashes, and inspire personal responsibility to prevent drinking and driving. The public service advertisement which emphasized the grave consequences of drinking and driving with a depiction of two glasses crashing into each other, won the 1984 classic CLIO award for best overall ad campaign - commercial or public service. (adcouncil.org)

There was also a comparable anti-drug campaign in 1986 that incorporated the go-go community, which Lornell & Stephenson (2001, p. 246) detail. The city's Regional Addiction Program (RAP) requested city funding to record an album and video called the "Go-Go Drug Free Project" in June 1986.

JAS FUNK:

Brother Duck, Tony and Rayful

Yeah, don't get drunk back there at the bar

Don't get drunk back there at the bar Rayful, because

Friends do not let friends drive drunk, no they don't

(REPEAT 4X'S)

(BEAT CHANGE)

R.E. GET BUSY ONE TIME

(AD LIBS)

(BEAT CHANGE)

SHAKE IT(BUT DON'T BREAK IT)

Testing, Testing 1,2,3 in the place to be, hit it

I'm talkin' to you soul brothers, jitta bugs

Hip cats with them fancy hats

Pretty ladies with them pretty smiles

All decked out in the latest styles

Hips shakin, breath takin', devastatin' and fascinatin'

Gatherin' here from far and near

To get on down in this atmosphere

SHONUFF(CROWD REPEATS)

(REPEAT 4X'S)

We want you to shake it to east, shake it to the west

We want you to shake it to the east, shake it to the west,

Shake it to the one that you love the best

And that's who?

(CROWD SAY'S: R.E.)

(REPEAT 4X'S)

We want to make you sweat, 'til you get wet

Just to see how funky you can get

Don't want no tears, don't want no lies

And furthermore, I don't want no alibis

Cause y'all moves are hip, that ain't all

This groove's designed for the big and small

Thank you so much for comin' again

Grab you a friend and blend on in, all do it

You know you really come to boogie (Crowd says: Yeah Boy)

(REPEAT 4X'S)

Shake it, but don't break it y'all  
Gon' and loosen your body  
(REPEAT 4X'S)

(AD LIBS)

(BEAT CHANGE)  
DO THE MICKEY<sup>38</sup>

(BEAT BREAKDOWN)  
JAS FUNK:  
If you like champagne, just pop the cork  
Stir it a while, and give it time to work  
If you like it a lot, just make it a double  
That's why the Dom Perignon crew, is supposed to give a bubble

SHONUFF(REPEAT 4X'S)

(CROWD CHANTING: DO THE MICKEY)  
JAS FUNK:DO WHAT? (CROWD CHANT)  
JAS FUNK:SAY WHAT YALL? (CROWD CHANT)  
JAS FUNK:SAY WHAT NOW? (CROWD CHANT)  
JAS FUNK:WHAT DID I HERE? (CROWD CHANT)

You feel it in your heart. You feel it in your soul  
Go-Go Mickey just make you wanna rock and roll, shonuff

JAS FUNK:REPEAT AFTER ME  
YOU FEEL IT IN YOUR HEART (CROWD REPEATS)  
YOU FEEL IT IN YOUR SOUL (CROWD REPEATS)  
GOGO MICKEY MAKES US (CROWD REPEATS)  
ROCK AND ROLL (CROWD REPEATS)  
(REPEAT 2X'S)

There's a cat named Mickey from outta town,  
Dum, d, dum, d, dum, d, di, I  
All wait, wait a minute y'all, break it back down, Footz<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Do The Mickey" was a go-go cover of an old Smokey Robinson song which became a dance created by Rare Essence's new conga player, Milton "Go-Go Mickey" Freeman.

<sup>39</sup> Quentin "Footz" Davidson is considered by many to be the greatest go-go drummer of all time. In the fall of 1994, his body was found along a highway in Landover. He had been shot in the back of the head at age 33 (Wartofsky 2001).

This how it go

THE LADIES SAY: DUM DI I  
THE FELLAS SAY: DUM DI OH  
(REPEAT 4X'S)

LADIES PART: There's a cat name Mickey from outta town  
FELLAS PART: He spreadin' a new dance all around  
LADIES PART: In just a matter of few days  
FELLAS PART: His thing became a new dance craze

DO THE MICKEY (CROWD REPEATS)  
GOGO MICKEY (CROWD REPEATS)  
(REPEAT 4X'S)

(CROWD CHANTING: GOGO MICKEY)

LADIES PART: When people see him play, they begin to see  
FELLAS PART: This cat name Mickey, doing the go-go thing  
LADIES PART: And it's really something to see, yeah  
FELLAS: This cat named Mickey, doing the go-go thing

DO THE MICKEY (CROWD REPEATS)  
GOGO MICKEY (CROWD REPEATS)  
(REPEAT 4X'S)

On Behalf of that Dom Perignon crew, Nuno, Rio and Duck  
And all the gang  
Boomie, King Tut, Cle Pop and Rob on there Job, Big Brother Cliff and Cornell  
And the TM crew, yes indeed we love you too  
Big brother Tony, Brother ain't no phony  
Supa Dupa Cooper, Lisa of the World  
Y'all sure got this dance now.  
And the TM crew, y'all

BREAK IT ON DOWN

Hang in there, Pee Wee  
If we left anything, anybody out,  
Shoulda came down front and scream and shot

---

Cause we didn't wanna leave anybody out y'all  
(FADING OUT)  
Please leave carefully, when y'all leave  
Y'all got a record that's gonna keep the whole neighborhood rockin'  
My goodness!<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Go-Go Nico agrees that this recording accomplished this goal. Nico says it was released on Christmas, 1986, it is not clear what date the album was recorded. "This was the album that "really grabbed the city by its ears," Nico told me. (Personal communication, 2006). Rare Essence had just lost Lil' Benny who left to start his own band, Little Benny and the Masters. Nico notes that street vendors sold T-Shirts inspired by the album with a cartoon character of Mickey Mouse doing the Go-Go Mickey Dance. The T-shirts may have been pressed by a company called Madness Connection, a Georgia Avenue clothing store established in 1984 and among the first to sell monogrammed hats and T-shirts emblazoned with a coveted logo, began catching on in parts of the city.

## Chapter 7: LIVENESS: Drumming the News and Knitting Communities in 2006



Backyard Band leader Genghis gestures toward the crowd at the University of Maryland-College Park on Feb. 2006, as Trey, lead singer from UCB (Uncalled4Band) sits in to perform his hit song on local radio, “Sexy Lady.” Go-go artists frequently sit-in and rotate rosters, much like jazz artists. Illustration 6.

## OVERVIEW

A conga drum roll announces the entrance of Big G, a.k.a. Genghis, a.k.a. Ralph Glover, a.k.a. The Ghetto Prince, to the stage at the Stamp Student Union at the University of Maryland-College Park.

*BOM bom BOM! Badabadabadabadabadaba BOM-bom!*

The 6'6" leader of Backyard Band glides onstage in a white T-shirt over a black long-sleeved shirt, his deep-chocolate brown face framed by neat cornrows with beaded tips. A gold chain with a large diamond-encrusted cross pendant hangs at his lanky neck. He squints at the spotlight obscuring his view of the hundreds of young fans spread before him. A large diamond flashes in his left earlobe.

"I wanna say what's up to Rongita," Ghenghis says in a deep, guttural rasp, as the last strains of the keyboard chorus for Raphael Sadiq's "Still Ray" fade out. "I wanna thank everybody for coming out, man. For the sounds of the BYB. This how we do it."

For nearly two decades, go-go audiences have followed the 33-year-old bandleader and "lead talker" to various DC-area venues to be a part of his live, freestyled testimonies. Through dance, chants, and song, BYB fans have been both witness and participants of his storied life. Go-go fans have heard the voice deliver political speeches urging peace for warring gangs, and calling for the political rights of the District residents, and freestyle-rap about the gangster lifestyle he once lived. Go-go fans have triumphed with him after he survived jail stints and numerous attempts on his life, including one incident in nearby Langley Park when he was shot several times while performing onstage. They've grieved with him during shows as

he mourned countless fans/friends who did not survive the violent drug wars of the late 1980s and 1990s when he built his street legend (Hopkinson, 2003).

In addition to his heavy BYB touring schedule, hosting a weekly radio show on a top FM station (WPGC 95.5), at the time of the performance, Ghenghis was also building a career as an actor. A rolled-up script for the upcoming season of HBO's "The Wire," where he plays the role of a top lieutenant in a Baltimore drug organization, is in the back pocket of his jeans. Hours after the Backyard Band's 2006 Black History Month performance is over, this University of Maryland building will return to a paler complexion and reality. But as soon as Ghenghis steps on stage, he welcomes the crowd to his world.

*Maryland U,  
we'd like to welcome y'all to the Backyard building.  
Know wha'm talkin' bout?  
Yeah.  
I'm trying to get into the groove man.  
Everybody welcome theyself.  
To a beautiful party tonite.  
'Till they tell us we gotta slide out...  
We gon' take over this building, this whole school.  
I want everybody to be ready for it.*

A personal videographer documenting Ghenghis's life buzzes intermittently around him on stage. The musical elements of the band are filled out onstage thusly: A young man wearing a black wave cap and Howard university T-shirt toggles between congas and a percussion set; two keyboard/synthesizer players; two



vocalists; and two members of another popular go-go group, UCB, who will sit in and perform their local radio hit “Sexy Lady.” A boy of about two years old sings into a microphone that appears to be turned off. A growing entourage swells as the performance wears on: young women in loud 80s fuchsia and out-to-there natural hairstyles, cherry-dyed bobs and auburn afro puffs and young men wearing T-shirts and sweats and cool-pose grimaces. Ghenghis makes a series of calls to which the audience responds.

*Say what?*

*How it feel?*

*Where they at?*

On the front row, below the stage, fans thrust T-shirts in the air bearing the names of their neighborhoods and crews, and R.I.P. (Rest In Peace) shirts with the names of dead friends, hand signs, all vying to be included into Ghenghis’s freestyle shout-out. Ghenghis holds up his closed hands, snaps four fingers open and closed, then raises his hands in the air, signaling the band to launch into its classic hit, “Keep it Gangsta.”

The crowd answers with an explosion of movement and chants, a pronounced shift in the atmosphere. Saxophone comes, then more drums. The “motorbooties” on the dance floor rev into first gear. Moments, later, the band segues into another song, “Pretty girl,” as the roto-toms rev the bodies into second gear.

Ghengis: 25<sup>th</sup>?

Crowd and band: Rock the boat!

Ghengis: Seat Pleasant?

Crowd and band: Rock the Boat!

Ghenghis: LeDroit?

Crowd and band: Rock the Boat!

Jay-Pooh, Ghenghis's cousin and entourage member comes back on stage from cruising the dance floor, collecting the names of neighborhoods and crews he's tapped into his cell phone. Jay-Pooh reports the names in Ghenghis's ear as he calls them into the mike. The band plays several conga-inflected covers of popular songs from the rappers Nas ("Oochie Wally"), Big Boi ("Kryptonite--I'm On It"), and Kanye West ("Gold Digger") There will be a Beat Ya Feet contest on stage a girl from Landover jumps on to stage to try to show-up a girl from Seat Pleasant.

Time draws near and it's time to wrap up the show. It wouldn't be a BYB show without some words of inspiration and an elegy from the guru of go-go.

"Be a leader. Don't be a follower. Love y'all so much. Keep it real. Rest in Peace Marcus 2-6-4."

\* \* \*

News offers more than facts; it offers reassurance and familiarity in shared community experiences (Bird and Dardenne 1988). The heart of the go-go's message generating/storytelling function is the live show, which is the essence of the go-go experience and how it builds community in this alternate public sphere. This is the primary source of news. In this chapter, I will provide a close examination of how go-go tells stories. Hebdige (1979/1987) noted that the means by which ideas are disseminated in our society is not the same for all classes; some groups have more say, more opportunity to make rules, to organize meaning. Musical communities are

an arena in which meaning-making becomes possible at a structural level. These musical apparatuses make it possible to transmit ideas, emotions, and impulses that cannot be verbalized, or that demand nuance and ambiguity. Thus music becomes a metaphorizing medium (Cross, 2005).

Documentary filmmakers have found that the cultural positioning of the apparatus used to tell the story helps audience distinguish fact from fiction. Grainy, black-and-white images associated with World War II footage are seen as more credible than slick Hollywood-style productions (Winston, 1995). The go-go apparatus is characterized by its “rough” aesthetic, serendipity, lack of studio scripting and polish, and hyper-local focus. One of my research partners, “Dice,” a 19-year-old member of INI a go-go band based in College Park, Maryland, explained how go-go’s gritty aesthetic is a reflection of the left-behind people and communities it represents:

It’s more music of the struggle. It’s more the gutter sound. In most of the neighborhoods, everybody’s poor. Everybody’s struggling. Go-go doesn’t go mainstream. It’s for the people of the DC area. We are not all dressed up. People look at us from the outside: ‘ya’ll dirty, y’all this. Y’all gangsta.’ It’s the whole struggle of being poor and being black in America. (Personal communication, November, 2005)

Here I will briefly discuss five technologies go-go uses to generate messages consistent with this aesthetic: 1) Percussion 2) Voice/ Bodies 3) P.A. System/P.A. tapes 4) Cameras.

### **Drumming the News (Percussion)**

The poet Thomas Sayers Ellis describes go-go as “a grammar,” in which drums are the subject, with the cowbells and timbales serving as adjectives and adverbs (Personal communication, November, 2005). The heavy percussion of go-go is also the apparatus that most closely links this musical function with its origins in West Africa where drums are in effect the newspapers, delivering the news. In Ugandan society “talking drums” are used as a medium of mass communication to send urgent messages (Mushengyezi, 2003).

Go-go is resplendent in forms of percussion, including inverted plastic buckets. However, in many ways, the conga drum is the apparatus most critical to the go-go experience, because it is the instrument that defines the go-go sound: No congas, no go-go. Go-go’s use of roto-toms, or drums that have no shell and whose pitch can be manipulated, also deserve special attention. Roto-toms are sometimes viewed as a metaphor for the attitude of a new generation of go-go fans heavily influenced by hip-hop and/or street culture. The hip-hop historian Jeff Chang (2005) points out some go-go producers single out the roto-toms as driving narrative force, at some points in a composition, the “roto-tom’s telling the story.” In earlier days of go-go, the roto-toms were used mostly at the climax of the performance at the height of release of dance energy, but their use has come to be more prevalent in a new generation of bands (Spearchucker, 2002). However for a new generation of bands, the heavy, nonstop use of the roto-toms reflects their high-speed, heavily mediated world and sensory overload. Roto-toms may be also read as a metaphor for pre-

ejaculation and/or bullets. Dice, the 19-year-old go-go artist and fan, explained “now it’s *bang-bang*, the roto-tom” (Personal correspondence, November 2005).

### **Voice/Bodies**

For the band and the audience, the body is a crucial medium as a billboard for fashion and dance. Hands are used to create signs representing different crews and parts of the city. Here at the apparatus level, the bodies are simply the billboard, a blank slate used to project semiotic message via fashion and body language.

In go-go, the voice of the “lead talker” is a primary apparatus for delivering information. Lead talkers are the front men, hosts, bandleaders, news anchors, and principal rappers (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001). Backyard Band’s Genghis uses the apparatus of voice to great effect: The voice itself, scratchy, gravelly and screamed raw. The pitch, texture, and feel of the voice convey a sense of gravitas lending a degree of credibility to his tales of life in the streets of Washington.

### **Public Address**

Public address system is the soundboard often manned by engineers who manipulate echoes and sounds to create the go-go sound. The use of the P.A. system is the same as go-go’s diasporic cousins, including hip-hop, juju, and reggae often influenced by the Caribbean. Hip-hop was pioneered by immigrants who brought the Jamaican-style “sound system,” creating their own versions of mixing boards as mobile deejays (George, 1998, p. 17). Real-time transmission and amplification of this live, unscripted message still honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have a valuable experience that leaves an audible trace.

PA's or P.A.tapes are live recordings made through the soundboard and burned onto a tape or CD. In the early years of go-go, fans held their own recorders. I discuss the role and the industry of the P.A. recordings in Chapter 5, centered on the life history of "Go-Go Nico" Hobson. For those who did not attend the event, the P.A. tape allows those that missed it to hear the news (what happened), who was there, etcetera. Live performances achieve a testimonial quality, a sense of history and symbolic cultural capital within certain cultural contexts while cross-pollinating live and mediated technologies (Auslander, 1999).

### **Cameras**

It is a go-go tradition to have a corner set-up backdrop, where an enterprising photographer sells photos. This is a tradition often referred to by its old technology, the Polaroid, although the photographs are typically digital now. Often the corner contains backdrops airbrushed with murals bearing images of the good life: champagne, fast cars, and expensive liquor. There was no Polaroid corner at the Backyard Band show at the University of Maryland; However, the videographer who was a member of the Backyard entourage served this function, along with two young videographers hired by the student group that hosted Backyard Band to record the event. The technology of the apparatus evolves, however the impulse is the same.

This apparatus of the camera or videocamera is analogous to the live recording: It is a record of who is there, one that can be used in other contexts, a few of which I will describe shortly. All of these apparatuses used in go-go underscore the fact while the primary function of go-go experience to celebrate each life, the

secondary function is to create a momentary impression and durable record of each life—before it's too late.



Illustration 7. This was the Polaroid corner set-up at the Hot Shoppes, an all-ages go-go club in Marlow Heights, Md. during the summer of 2002. (c) 2002, The Washington Post. Photo by Marvin Joseph. Reprinted with Permission.



Illustration 8. Another “Polaroid” corner at a Backyard Band show in 2003 at the club 2:K:9 in the Northwest section District just off U Street. (c) 2003, The Washington Post. Photo by Marvin Joseph. Reprinted with Permission.

## Decoding Go-Go Narratives

*Africa disagrees.*

*with subject-verb agreement.*

-- Thomas Sayers Ellis (2005, p. 4).

Western audiences frequently associate storytelling using a linear model with a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. Listeners lacking the cultural capital and system-specific frames to understand alternate syntaxes often dismiss the presence of narrative if it does not conform to this format. Hip-hop historian Jeff Chang (2005) reflects such perspectives in the following interview with a member of the go-go scene:

“I was talking to a go-go songwriter one time. I said ‘Man, you need a verse here.’ The guy said the roto-tom was telling the story. “Can’t put no verse there, the roto-tom telling the story.” Okay. Alright. You know what the roto-tom is saying. Maybe the people in the audience know what the roto-tom saying. But the people in Baltimore don’t know what the hell that dang roto-tom is saying!” He shakes his head. “Go-go’s got the same problem today as it did back then. You don’t have no good storylines.” (Chang , 2005, p. 409)

Lornell & Stephenson voice a similar frustration:

The downfall of go-go’s writing is a lack of new material coupled with too many songs that lack a narrative drive—that tell a compelling (or



even interesting) story, or at least develop a coherent story line. (Lornell & Stephenson, 2001, p. 58)

Go-go does have story lines; They are highly abstract, impressionistic tales—poetry as opposed to prose. Go-go is “the most radical opposition to English syntax there is,” according to Ellis (Personal communication, November 2005). In many non-Western cultures, orality itself represents a type of mediation that requires its own kind of literacy, program, or code sometimes called “oracy” (Mushengyezi, 2003). In go-go, that code is embedded within a fast-moving interplay of the dialectic between the band and audience. As a non-native Washingtonian, there are many meanings in go-go that necessarily elude this researcher as well. However, I will attempt to discuss four such codes or narrative strategies for storytelling in go-go from my journalistic and ethnographic fieldwork: context, and text, which includes fashion and dance.

### **Context**

The journalist-storyteller is a specialist working in a “communical matrix” in which the public has faith in them because they are believed to have access to the truth (Bird & Dardenne, 1988). In go-go, the lead talker, or bandleader is considered one such specialist. The lead talker serves a similar function to hip-hop emcees, and Yoruban praise-singers, poets, balladists, drummers, and singers in juju music who serve as a living archive of history (Alaja-Browne, 1989; Lornell Stephenson, 2001, p.13). The lead talker also represents the African trickster figure, or Esu, the Yoruba

deity who serves as the guardian of the crossroads between the spiritual realm and the physical world of humanity (Smith, 2003.)

Backyard Band's Genghis is a prototypical example of such a specialist. His life's narrative—some of it depicted in the mainstream news media, most of it not—symbolizes the most pressing challenges to the generation of Washingtonians who came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s as DC's soaring crime rate earned it the moniker of "Murder Capital." From his arrests to his political activism, Genghis is an iconic figure whose resilience and life narrative is embedded in the history of Backyard Band, the larger go-go community, and indeed, the city itself. Each time Genghis was sent to jail, it increased the anticipation and value of BYB live shows when he was released, as P.A. tape trader Go-Go Nico told me (Personal correspondence, 2006). Genghis is a professional witness, using the microphone as his journal and allowing the crowd to experience his life while he experiences theirs. His life story has become so deeply interwoven in the narrative of Washingtonians that the storylines need not be verbalized. At the time of the concert at the University of Maryland, part of the story implied but not verbalized during his performance was what it will mean to the go-go community if his acting career takes off following the success of his role on the critically acclaimed HBO series "The Wire."

Lead talkers also use the live moment to tell stories in more linear form. My research partner, Dice, who was a rapper for the INI go-go band, said that he tends to use the opportunity of the live performance to give a direct account of what is going on in his world.

I wasn't born with no silver spoon...I like to freestyle, like a news reporter, coming straight out of my soul. Anything that you go through in your daily life. I can't rap about having money or cars or model girlfriends. None of that stuff. I've lost so many people in my life, death is nothing...The simple fact, it's gonna happen today, or the next day. (Personal communication, November 2005)

Within the live performance, Genghis's and Dice's life narratives are just two of many vying for recognition during the dialogue between the dance floor and the band. Go-go specialists do not monopolize center stage like a hegemonic news anchor announcing "this is the world." As many individuals at a go-go at a given time, there are just as many stories and back-stories and the crowd aggressively vies for their time in the spotlight. Many narratives, controversies, personalities, and debates have been going on for decades. Arriving at the go-go without knowing this context is like arriving at a movie five minutes before it's over, or reading the last 10 pages of a novel.

### ***Reading the Code***

In addition to speech, discourse analysis can examine any material with symbolic content, such as photographs, clothes or buildings (Burr, 1995, p. 150). Go-go is rich in such discourses. Here I will discuss just five: the use of cover songs, the roll call, fashion, dance and "The Pocket."

### **Dance**

Dance is a rich sources of narratives in go-go. The "Beat Your Feet" dance movement is perhaps the most telling contemporary example. The Beat Ya Feet contest at the BYB show at the University of Maryland is just one example of a

resurgence of high-energy go-go dance that began in the early 2000s (Spearchucker, 2002). Typically the dance begins with a roto-tom overdrive, which is the cue for dancers to let loose into a frenzy of movement. A writer for the online magazine, *Take Me Out To The Go-Go* magazine writer evocatively describes first seeing the dance sometime around 2001.

Fights appeared to break out everywhere. One minute I'm watching this guy and girl (probably no older than fifteen) just grooving with each other, the next minute he's taking swings at her, she's hitting him in the gut, he pulls out a whip and lashes her, she pulls out a knife and starts shankin' him, all the while neither one has missed a single beat of the music. She gets up, smacks him across the face two times. It didn't look like much of a hit but it must have been because his head turned right and then left. He recovers, gathers himself then leaps in the air while pulling his t-shirt up, then slam dunks her head under his t-shirt. After this they both re-gather themselves for the next mutual assault. Then I look around, and this scene is being repeated all over the place. I feel like I have walked into a bad science fiction movie where the whole world has gone mad. (Spearchucker, 2002)

The basic movement is the feet make a slapping motion on the ground as if putting out a fire—to the beat. On top of that, the dancers usually act out a scene sometimes from pop culture, tell a joke, or tell a story from their own lives. Once at the Hot Shoppes restaurants that turned into a teen go-go club in Prince George's in 2002, I saw a dancer act out an old Michael Jackson Pepsi commercial. Moments later, I saw the same dancer mime shooting up heroin into his veins. These are “dance plays” in the continuum of a long line of black expressive cultures, which have been integral mode of communication since the days of slavery. These communicative practices thrived on plantations, where dance and rebellion were intertwined, dance being “satiric, pointed instruments of criticism and resistance, unbeknownst to the

slave holders" (Hazzard-Gordon, 1992). Nketia (1974) described a West African "Dance Drama" which is remarkably similar to Beat Ya Feet dance which dancers act out a series of scenes:

The dramatic use of music and dance finds its highest expression in the dance drama—mimed actions incorporated into the dance or use as extensions of the dance proper. A dance drama may be based on many themes, without necessarily having a single coherent story line. Although it usually stands out as distinctive spectacle, it may also be incorporated into the activities of a ritual or ceremonial occasion. (Nketia, 1974, p. 218)



ILLUSTRATION 9. I ran into Marvin "Slush" Taylor, 19, at the Hot Shoppes Café in Marlow Heights, Md. in the summer of 2002. He is credited with creating the "Beat Ya Feet" dance. A few weeks after this photo and accompanying article (Hopkinson, 2002) was published, Slush was gunned down while driving home from this go-go club, one of a half-dozen shooting victims that summer linked to the club. The next week, teenagers returned to the club with "R.I.P. Slush" T-shirts. Soon after his death Slush's stepmother told me in an interview that the publication of his picture and article was one of his proudest moments. In this photo, he appears to be wearing a "Happy Birthday" T-shirt of a dead friend. (c) 2002, The Washington Post. Photo by Marvin Joseph. Reprinted with Permission.

## **Adaptation**

As suggested by the BYB performance at the University of Maryland, the cultural narratives in contemporary go-go are dominated by “cover” tunes, or adaptations of current popular, R&B, and hip-hop, in this case both mainstream hip-hop artists such as Big Boi and Kanye West, and more obscure songs by mid-range artists such as Raphael Sadiq. The dominance of cover songs persists despite criticism of the practice within the go-go community, most notably from the WPGC FM 95.5’s DJ Flexx (Hammond 2006). Western practice tends to marginalize the art of adaptation, privileging of artists who compose scores over artists who perform and reinterpret those works. This is because non-Western musical traditions are almost exclusively performance traditions (Gilroy, 1987). Many leading black cultural critics have challenged such definitions of “originality.” Zora Neale Hurston (1934) defined originality as “modification of ideas,” which, she insisted, is the definition of being black in America: “The Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.” Gilroy (1987) points out that in new “sound system cultures” such as reggae and hip-hop, the role of the composer of the piece is separate from “the equally important work of those who adapt and rework it so that it directly expresses the moment in which it is being consumed” (Gilroy, 1987, p. 165). In his theory of the signifying monkey, Gates (1988) argues that black artists are critics by definition, signifying on previous works. In his discussion of music in the Harlem Renaissance

era Anderson (2001) noted that jazz artists delighted in adapting mainstream music as a way to “show-up” the original composer.

The go-go bandleader Genghis also defends the value of the performance tradition and the role of live interpretation to an interviewer—in rhyme to punctuate his point:

I can free-style. Anybody can sit down and write a rap, but I can make one up of the top of my head. I can rap about what a person has on, what the ladies are doing, what’s going on at the bar. I got some other things coming up that will make the city proud of me and make the haters hate me even more (Westmoreland, 2001).

Go-go’s interactive, dialogistic structure allows a space for negotiation between the audience and the band that produces an unscripted account of lives of all the people present. These timely adaptations are narratives embedded in the *social/cultural* milieu, including the physical environment, peer network, and history. Go-go artists revise cover tunes and artistic counter-discourse about how music should sound (The beat should be slower. There needs to be more layers of percussion. Throw in a conga riff there.) In deviating from the original lyrics, artists also opine on the original message, in effect, signifying on the original writer/composer. As Chuck Brown playfully signifies on Duke Ellington, by crooning: “It don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that go-go swing!” Thus in the live, hyperlocal context of go-go, the songs are completely transformed into a new message in the tradition of jazz and other black expressive forms.

### **The Function of the Roll Call**

A sizeable majority of contemporary go-go lyrical content consists of shout-outs, or “calling out spots.” The “spots” or names can be neighborhoods, nicknames, blocks, or crews. Typically before the show begins, the lead “talker” in go-go, who serves as the bandleader or his surrogate and host, circulates among the crowd, greeting patrons and collecting pieces of paper with their names or their neighborhood crews’ name. INI band, which opened the show before Backyard Band at the University of Maryland, had set up a Myspace page for the event for fans to post names for the band to call out at the show. The talker uses the names as text for composing ad-lib compositions, incorporating each name into a narrative or conducting a straight roll call. Like West African praise singers, this tradition exalts each individual, adding to their status and pays tribute to their place in the local scene earned via regular attendance at go-gos. According to Nketia (1974) other songs “are based on the use of allusions and poetic images conceived in the style of proverbs, or songs which exploit the evocative power of names and by-names. They may be reflective or philosophical, sentimental or satirical, humorous or comic” (p. 195).

Throughout the show, the lead talker recognizes members of the audience, their neighborhood or their crews, incorporating them into the performance through dance and verbal call & response. This process helps to produce the orienting function needed to set the stage for the cultural narratives. Like jazz and hip-hop, the go-go lead talker employs several standard phrases to bridge freestyle compositions present in many African-derived musical forms. As Nketia (1974) noted, the



repetition of these verbal and musical phrases serve to emphasize the singer's point, or give him time to think of something new to say.

In jazz it could be a lick by the saxophonist Charlie Parker, in hip-hop it may be "Throw your hands in the air!" (Smith, 2003). In go-go, there are several standard phrases. Among them: "Tell me wh-wh-wh-where ya'll from!" The audience responds by calling out the names of crews, neighborhoods or even churches. As Go-Go Nico told me, for many Washingtonians, a recording of them being shouted out on a recording is their "birthright" (Personal communication, December 2006.) This was an idea expressed recently in a series of articles in the *Washington Post* in the wake of a shooting death of a 17-year-old girl outside a Washington go-go club in January 2007. Four teenagers were asked to write about why they chose to "dance with danger at go-go clubs." One student explained it thusly:

When my friends and I went to a go-go one night, we had a great time because it was my birthday. In the club the members of the band M.O.B. were singing "It's Your Birthday, Doo-Doo." That's my nickname. They were recording, and they put me on the album. I was so happy! (McDougle, 2007)

Within this orienting function, birthdays are an occasion for shout-outs. So is death. "Rest In Peace" wishes comprise a substantial amount of the roll call. At the University of Maryland show in 2006, this was how Genghis closed the show. Similarly, during an April 2006 performance I attended. Familiar Faces lead talker Donnell Floyd led the crowd in a chant: "We gon' rock it for Footz!" This was an elegy for what many consider one of the greatest go-go drummers of all time who

was gunned down in 1994. Several months later, I asked Donnell Floyd why he felt compelled to memorialize his former band mate at the moment:

I don't want to bring the mood down too much. But sometimes, you have to remind people that this can be a short stay. It can be a long stay, it can be a short stay. Respect each other when you're partying. If someone gets a little bit too drunk. If you talk about the people that passed everyone once in a while, maybe it will click. That sometimes it's OK just to try to avoid conflict. (Personal correspondence, October 2006)

## **Fashion**

Clothes and uniforms may suggest class position, status, gender, age or subculture and may also be considered texts, which can be “read” for meaning (Burr, 1995, p. 150). The typical go-go uniform is comprised of expensive T-shirts and sweatsuits with embroidered logos of local and black owned companies representing the wearer's neighborhood. Washington's urban fashion industry became established as an offshoot of go-go in the early 1980s, starting with the Madness Connection. Many neighborhoods in the District and Prince George's County have storefronts selling the local T-shirts and sweats lines bearing logos that help to nonverbally state the community where the wearer resides. They comprise a network of storefronts, stationed in most black neighborhood in the District and Prince George's County, Md. concerts tickets and P.A. tapes are often sold (Hopkinson & Williams, 2003; Hopkinson, 2004). This corresponds with Nketia's (1974) discussion of the “visual display” or visual aspects of the social performances which are manifested through costumes.

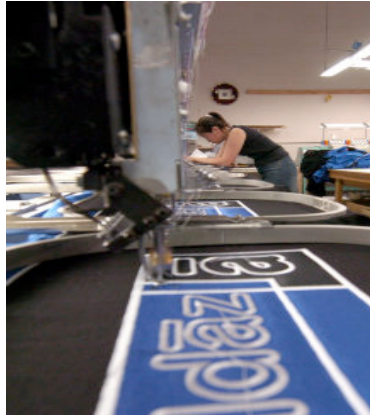


Illustration 10. A run for embroidered designs by Alldaz, a clothing line based in Northeast Washington. This photograph was taken at a factory in Northern Virginia, where the embroidery was done. (c) 2004, The Washington Post. Photo by Ricky Carioti. Reprinted with Permission.



Illustration 11. This 2003 photograph is South-African born and Prince George's County raised designer Vusi Mchunu, was one of the leading local designer popular among the go-go scene (Hopkinson and Williams 2003). His eponymous stores are located in Forestville Mall and Largo Town Center, in Prince George's County, Md. In 2006 Mchunu took the Best Designer prize at the WKYS Go-Go Awards at Constitution Hall. (c) 2003, The Washington Post. Photo by Michael Williamson. Reprinted with Permission.



Illustration 12. Several members of District of Columbia and Prince George's County based urbanwear companies at a meeting for the short-lived Unity Clothing Association (UCA) that was founded in August 2004 in response to a threat from a Korean competitor (Hopkinson 2004). This meeting took place at the Jasper's restaurant in Largo, Md., Three years later in 2007 with the election of D.C. native and self-described go-go fan, Mayor Adrian Fenty, UCA leader Ron "Mo" Moten and his anti-violence group "Peaceaholics" were awarded an \$800,000 contract to run anti-violence programs at two D.C. high schools. (c) 2004, The Washington Post. Photo by Lucian Perkins. Reprinted with Permission.

Patrons typically wear their neighborhood brand to the go-gos and elsewhere to nonverbally representation of the neighborhood they are from (Hopkinson & Williams, 2003). By wearing T-shirts and/or thrusting them up toward the stage during the live performance, the fans, much like a reader commenting on an author's blog, or a hyperlink, embed themselves into the live go-go performance. This makes fashion is critical element of nonverbal discourse and cultural narrative, part of what Nketia calls the "visual display."

Semioticians examine sign-systems used for communicative discourse with emphasis on the cultural context in which they were created and received. Hebdige (1979) noted how musical communities use "semiotic guerrilla" warfare as a

challenge to hegemonic forces via their clothing, musical, and cultural styles. The close relationship between between the local clothing companies and the go-go community became apparent in 2004, when a Korean merchant producing knock-offs of the DC brands threatened to take over the black-owned clothing industry. A go-gos across the city, lead talkers, including Genghis encouraged fans to bring their Korean brand up to the stage in support of the black-owned businesses (Hopkinson, 2004).

In the early 2000s, among the largest of dozens of these clothing companies operating the District and Prince George's County was H.O.B.O., which got its start in the mid-1990s making "RIP T-shirts" or shirts heat-pressed with photographs of dead young people, usually felled by the violence (Hopkinson, 2001). Much like the newspaper headlines, the R.I.P. T-shirts communicate a cultural narrative of grief, tragedy and loss—also a recurrent theme in compositions by the go-go talkers (Hopkinson & Williams, 2003; Hopkinson, 2003). The first day I attended the practices for the INI band in College Park, the whole band wore matching black R.I.P. t-shirts with the newspaper photograph of LaKita Tolson, a 19-year-old young mother and nursing student who had been killed while leaving a go-go the previous weekend in November 2005.

Often photographs used for the R.I.P. t-shirts are taken in the Polaroid corner of the go-go. For a series of articles on all the deaths of children under the age 18 in the District for the *Washington Post*, I was assigned to write about the passing of Roderick "Hot Rod" Valentine, a 16-year-old who died after being gunned down after leaving a go-go late one night several months before. When I contacted the detective working on the still-unsolved case, he was not able to locate a copy of the police

report. Just after Roderick was killed, his classmates came to school wearing R.I.P. T-shirts featuring a photograph of him posing at a go-go. Roderick's 19-year-old brother, Michael, told me how deeply embedded this apparatus, and narrative is embedded in District of Columbia culture: "It's like you know when somebody gets killed in DC, it's going to be some shirts made. It's like a doctor hitting your knee. It's just a reflex."

When I went to the local printing shop where the students had bought the shirts, the owner told me that he usually deletes the digital photographs after three months, but I was in luck, he happened to still have this one. As we looked through the shopkeeper's computer, located at Iverson Mall, just outside the District, he had a wide selection of "Polaroid" photographs of the 16-year-old to choose from, at the go-go, at prom, and so on. I could see that he had hundreds of other such photographs of young people who had passed away, many of them also taken in the go-go Polaroid corner. It was a deeply harrowing moment to realize that the police had no "official" record of Rodney's life, but this grim go-go ritual in this black public sphere had provided one (Hopkinson, 2004).



Illustration 13. I bought this R.I.P. T-shirt for \$26 at Iverson Mall in Prince George's County in May 2004. The shopkeeper's hard drive was filled with hundreds of images like these of young people posing at a go-go Polaroid with backdrop of fast cars or expensive champagne. I chose which photo and layout to create my own R.I.P T-shirts. Since the police report of his (unsolved) murder had been lost, this was the only official record of Rodney "Hot Rod" Valentine's 16-year-old life other than what his family had. I published a short article about Hot Rod for a *Washington Post* package on children lost to violence in the District.

Every shot attempts to capture  
 The will-to-survive of its target  
 High-top fades, hooded sweats, hard stares,  
 A Gucci background, a wicker chair.

(Ellis, 2005, p. 62)

### **Binary Cultural Codes**

As in virtually all black vernacular forms, double-talk and tricksterism abounds in go-go, which also sometimes obfuscates the narratives. Such was the case of "The Dippa." In 2003, the local mainstream news media had begun to report about

increased incidences of problems with the hallucinogenic drug PCP, which experts said began its resurgence in 2001, when a new format had been introduced called “dippers,” slang for cigarettes dipped in PCP (Fahrentdhold, 2003). In 2001, “The Dippa” was a major local radio hit by Backyard Band and had won the WPGC 95.5 FM “Battle of the Beats” so many times it had to be retired from the competition (Hammond, 2001). The new form of the drug was growing in popularity just as it appeared in a popular song with it in the title. While working on a *Washington Post* profile of Backyard Band leader Genghis, I asked him what responsibility the Backyard Band song “The Dippa,” had in fueling demand for the drug. Genghis responded by getting up from the table where we were having our lunch interview, and doing “The Dippa” dance: dipping his body side to side. With his actions, he was pleading ignorance to the song’s other meaning. Of course part of the dialectics in the black oral tradition is the ability to present two interpretations at once: one for authorities such as *Washington Post* reporters and a totally different one for live go-go audiences. Regardless of which interpretation one accepts, both interpretations spoke of real youth culture trends completely missed by Washington, D.C.’s mainstream news outlets.

### **Pulling the Stories out of The Pocket**

“The Pocket” is a groove in the go-go performance, in which the lead talker freestyles about cultural narratives and happenings, controversies—news most meaningful to the band and audience. This is the richest source of narratives, information, and history produced by go-go. “My man is back in the big chair!”



Genghis of Backyard Band announced live onstage during one performance, to cheers and laughter from the audience. Implied, but not stated, was that his “man” was Marion Barry, or that he’s celebrating the politicians return to the city council in 2004, after his many brushes with the law. Also unsaid, was that the “big chair” is a massive sculpture erected by a defunct furniture retailer that is a landmark in Anacostia. This is one of the blackest parts of the city, which had been Barry’s political base when he returned to office as a councilman. On the occasion of Ronald Reagan’s funeral in 2004, which caused a huge disruption to local Washington communities, Genghis of Backyard Band used The Pocket to loudly proclaim that he had no tears for the former president. In soul singer Raheem Devaughn’s live collaboration with Backyard Band in 2006, DeV Vaughn can be heard proclaiming loudly during a pocket: “George Bush is some bullshit!”

In highlighting these narratives, I don’t meant to suggest a trend toward political content in go-go. Lornell & Stephenson are correct that the focus is mostly to have a good time and not political commentary. However, go-go performances are so ubiquitous there are thousands and thousands of live recordings spanning three decades, it is impossible for researchers to make any definitive statements about what is and what is not discussed in the live go-go setting. Ultimately, these narratives in go-go tell the story of place, of people, personalities, and cultural trends. Some messages can be as complex as the a plea for black self-determination, as evidenced by the campaign to support the local black clothing industry in the District (Hopkinson, 2004). Or as evidenced in my above description of the University of

Maryland performance of Backyard Band, they can be message can be as straightforward as “I exist!” or a bluesy mournful ballad that “my friend is gone.”

As I showed in Chapter 6, sometimes it takes years later to have the proper perspective and understandings of what kinds of messages and stories, back stories, and wider implications that are being told in the live go-go moment. These alternate interpretations and value to young people’s, particularly young men’s subordinate status, a reinterpretation of the social world (Thornton, 1995). Manuel (1995) notes that non-mainstream cultures often scramble and recycle various aesthetic elements to “construct their own gerrymandered sense of identity out of imagerial *objets trouvee*, be they dress codes or musical styles.” In this way, Manuel says the group’s “otherness” can be tapped as a source of unique expressive power and vitality.

The stories in go-go are abundant and rich, but they are what James Scott describes as “hidden transcripts,” and one will have to work to find the narratives. (Davis, 1999) noted that direct translation of blues images into a visual and linear narrative violates blue discourse, which is always complicated by what is not said. As Tony Morrison famously told an interviewer when asked about the opacity of her prose, “it’s called reading, my dear” (Asim, 2003). Ultimately, readings of go-go public sphere must include an understanding of the psychological and cultural dimensions of place, apparatus, and code.

Go-go is an alternate reality constructed through rituals in an often fleeting geographic context, from strip clubs to elite schools such as Sidwell Friends, the University of Maryland, government buildings, restaurants, backyards, skating rinks, community centers, parks, and middle school cafeterias. There are few spaces in the

Washington region that go-go hasn't colonized at some point. The same economy of repetition gives the newscast its power as well. News technologies have the ability to transmit the same message to a vast number of people simultaneously and in different contexts. The apparatuses must be present, as well as an audience with the cultural capital to recognize the codes and follow the scripts. Go-go is a ritual communicative medium that can be read, and travel, much like a book, newspaper or laptop is folded up and carried.



## **Chapter 8: CONCLUSIONS**

### **OVERVIEW**

By viewing black communicative traditions across time, space, and through the lives of individuals, I have explored how go-go is a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, as well as a journalistic medium telling rarely heard stories about the nation's capital. In a variety of geographic contexts and historical moments, music has been a dominant cultural apparatus used to create community. So has journalism. Within the African Diaspora, these news story-telling traditions evolved into the Information Age and became what Chuck D, referring to hip-hop, described as black America's CNN.

In the "Call & Response" chapter, I reviewed the roots of this storytelling tradition in West Africa, traced its jagged path across the Atlantic Ocean, and back. While its combinations vary and are delivered through evolving technologies, these communicative traditions create a ritual space in which a "griot" figure moderates a live discourse about the news of the day. Using these time-honored scripts that include fashion, dance, roll call, and audience call & response that are eminently global, go-go has resisted commoditization while expressing the identity, culture—and reality—in many of Washington's black communities. Here I show how the call & response is more than just a gimmick or verbal tick, but a deeply transcendent call across the Atlantic Ocean in dialogue with communicative traditions that originated in Africa.

These African-derived storytelling traditions are forms of publicity not unlike the “display of inherent spiritual power or dignity before an audience” described by Habermas (1962/1989) that emerged in feudal Europe as the slave economy was dismantled (p.xv). Under both systems, the staging of publicity was tied to semiotic cues written on badges and insignia, clothing and hairstyles, rhetoric, and music. Impromptu verbal and physical jousts were constantly being staged everywhere. These public forums were the first place to introduce and legitimate new ideas and creative works. Across time and space, these traditions have been made and remade across a variety of mediated and unmediated platforms. Go-go is just one such platform.

### **A Physical Space**

Habermas argued that public spheres in their most ideal form are a physical space, where face-to-face interaction can happen, such as coffee houses and pubs. Washington is the nation’s capital, where laws are debated, enacted and interpreted, taxes are collected and services distributed for the whole country. Thus, this location was designed to accommodate discourse through a variety of physical sites located in the District of Columbia that are repositories of debate and memory, including the Vietnam and World War II memorials, the House and Senate floors, and the National Mall and Smithsonian museums. Thus, the city is located at the physical nexus of debate and discourse about the pressing issues of the day, including national governance, education, policy, slavery, poverty, and civil rights. As the capital city, the conversations and debates are specifically national and therefore take on additional symbolic weight.

It was because of the symbolic importance of the District of Columbia that the debates that take place there often serve as a laboratory for issues of race and justice. This was what led Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 to use the city as a backdrop to stage a Poor People's protest march on the National Mall in Washington. King prepared to gather thousands of people in Washington in the wake of a string of uprisings in urban centers that exploded into fiery and sometimes-violent racial rebellions. King never lived to see the plan of the march come to fruition because he was assassinated in April 1968. Following his death, an angry crowd of District of Columbia residents looted and burned stores in black neighborhoods, destroying the economic infrastructure in the black city-within-a-city. These demonstrations devastated a community already reeling from middle class suburban flight, which had both blackened and impoverished the city's core.

In many ways, the violence and mayhem that erupted following King's death set the physical stage for the birth of go-go. The 1968 rebellion reflected a distinctly consumerist, capitalistic, and hedonistic rage; targeting liquor stores, clothing stores, and looting of the goods and services offered in the segregated black community. The go-go scene filled a power vacuum, bringing a steady crowd of Washingtonians in and around the city's core for fellowship, communion and the expression of a post-riot, post-Civil Rights Movement urban reality. This new musical form helped to bring new life to the charred urban core. Those who demanded that blacks rebuild the city after the riots only partly delivered on this promise of a prosperous Chocolate City. Black elected leaders governed a greatly diminished tax base and a physically

depressed, riot-scarred infrastructure with a limited access to development funding. Go-go flourished both because of and in spite of the decades of adversity that preceded and riots and intensified after them. Go-go established musical spaces in the ruins of the riotous social upheaval: crumbling historic performance spaces such as the Howard, in hole-in-the wall nightclubs such as the Maverick Room, backyards, community centers and outdoor parks.

Post-Industrial, post-desegregation socioeconomic conditions gave rise to a parallel underground economy in the District of Columbia. The go-go underground economy quickly became a primary economy for many black urban dwellers for which go-go emerged as an expressive output and commodity. Much like its historical antecedents, blues clubs, rent parties, juke joints, and early jazz communities in New York, go-go assumed its place at the center of the black public sphere. It functioned both because of and despite these adverse conditions. Thus the spectacle of a government building moonlighting as a go-go became not only possible, but went largely unnoticed by the “mainstream” media.

### **Club U and the Migration**

In the Club U chapter, I demonstrated how within this municipal body, a single, bloody Washington intersection located at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets came to serve as the historical, ritual, and spiritual center of black Washington, and a publicly owned sphere. I examined the moment in 2005 when more blood was spilled at this sacred intersection. The discourse over the murder of Terrance Johnson and the future



of Club U became another historical instance in which this specific physical space came to function as a proxy for race relations and the larger sociopolitical shifts going on in the city. In this chapter, I also made a case for black Washington as a political and cultural capital of black America, in part due to its unique positioning in the history of slavery, and the city's federal and colonial governance structure. The city's structure and history have as a whole had mixed implications for blacks living in the city. Various White House administrations helped promote the cause of black self-determination in varying degrees, however as a whole, the city emerged as a privileged place for blacks, a place of high levels of homeownership, education, and employment compared to other urban centers. The presence of historically black Howard University also contributed to the city's status as Chocolate City.

The debate over the future of Club U exposed yet another seismic historical shift in the District of Columbia: By the mid 2000s black residents were no longer the majority of property owners in the city. The city was reversing its course, a correction taking place in urban centers across the United States. White, well-to-do residents returned to the U Street corridor leading to another rebirth of the business strip and higher scrutiny of and tolerance for crime. Thus the end of this particular high profile go-go told the larger tale of gentrification. This is a death knell for the Chocolate City, which prompted the migration of black enterprise into the eastern suburbs of Washington in Prince George's County, Maryland.

A similar point about the migration of the black public sphere was revealed over the course of Chapter 5, the life history of Go-Go Nico. The various stages of Nico's

life chronicle the larger structural transformation of Washington's black public sphere as it went into economic decline and the off-the-books economy took root. Nico kept moving east over the course of his life: First he sold go-go recordings on the Metro trains; then a downtown Washington mobile stand; at a 14<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest music store across from Club U; then, roughly two blocks east to Ben's Chili Bowl. His final stop in the District was into the city's Northeast quadrant on the gentrifying H Street corridor. In the spring of 2007, Nico moved to Prince George's County, living and working outside the city for the first time since his military service. Within a few months after that, the go-go store would be shuttered, as gentrification marched east across the H Street corridor, another mayor black economic hub that had been devastated by the 1968 riots. Like the a good part of the rest of the go-go community in the mid 2000s, including live performances venues and mom & pop stores, Nico's reality shifted outside the District. This mirrored the larger migration of black residents into Prince George's County, a regional shift in which blacks moved from inner city Washington to suburban and exurban Maryland.

Nico's encyclopedic knowledge of his collection of thousands of go-go recordings demonstrates that a history of Washington can be told through go-go music and many of his recordings. Thousands of recordings in Nico's collection tell the story of the time. The Fat Rodney v. DC Scorpio onstage battles told the story of the transition from DC to "Murder Capital." Other recordings spoke of shootings, killings, and personalities that rocked the city. Private collections such as Nico's form a rich archive of history and culture of Black Washington. This trade also contributes to the

continued vitality of go-go as a cultural information channel. Nico and other self-appointed cultural stewards of go-go in this colorful underground economy guard the borders of the go-go sphere, as well as archive and preserve these stories that otherwise live on only in the memories of the individuals who were part of the go-go community of that time.

### **Go-Go Live, 1986-2006**

In the final two chapters, I have brought to light two historically and geographically specific moments: a moment in remembered history of the go-go scene in 1986, the heyday of go-go, and a moment 20 years later at the University of Maryland, which is located in Prince George's County. Both performances tell the news of the time. In the "1986," chapter, I present a transcript of one performance that narrates the zeitgeist of Barry/Reagan/Bush era Washington, D.C. In this Rare Essence recording, bottles of champagne began to pop as the drug economy was poised to boom in the city, preceding and foreshadowing the city's influx of drug money as well as the attendant violence and mayhem of that era. The transcription of this Rare Essence recording shows a number of key newsmakers emerge in the off the books, underground economy years before the mainstream media caught on to what was happening. This recording announces the emergence of several key players in Washington's underground economy: Rayful Edmonds and Tony Lewis, partners in what would be one of the city's most successful criminal enterprises. The crowd was also introduced to the rapper Fat Rodney. All three of these individuals went on to become major mainstream newsmakers three years later. The 1986 performance took

place during a pivotal moment in which go-go was at the height of its popularity, the film “Good To Go” was released the same year, a time when go-go and hip-hop were getting equal billing in the city. It also marks the time when go-go began a different trajectory from hip-hop, to which I will return shortly.

This recording also illustrates how deeply official, federal Washington and the go-go public spheres are intertwined and how the content of their debates overlap. In my work as a journalist, I was keenly aware of how Washington, D.C.’s go-go and mainstream bourgeois public spheres appear to be separate and diametrically opposed. In reality, however, these are two overlapping spheres. Federal Washington and Black Washington are two sides of the proverbial coin. Much of the debates being conducted on the Senate floor are mirrored in the go-go industry. In 1986, the Reagan administration’s policies that encouraged the loosening of control over financial markets, and raised public safety concerns about drunk driving and the “War on Drugs.” A parallel debate was raging in the underground go-go economy on display at Breeze’s Metro Club in 1986. Here, street entrepreneurs capitalized on the loosening of controls in the riot-scarred city. These two discourses—the one at Breezes, and the one just a few miles away at the U.S. Capitol and White House in one city. Thus twenty years later at 2006 WKYS Go-Go Awards in Constitution Hall, it was Uncle Sam nudging fans into the show, both symbolically and literally.

Just as the dynamics of juju musical productions were strongly influenced by the vicissitudes of the Nigerian oil economy, and hip-hop was influenced by the entertainment infrastructure in New York and Los Angeles, the city of Washington’s identity as the center of federal power birthed this musical form and dictated its

trajectory. The federal economic base helped make Washington among the most economically stable black markets, which allowed its residents more control over stewardship of cultural capital. The stability of the federal economy trickled down to the black regional community as well. This local economy made it possible for go-go to resist the pull of standardization of youth culture created by the expansion of the public sphere onto cable television and radio. In these “mainstream” media, everything from fashion, to slang, to music was nationalized through the influence of hip-hop. Go-go maintained its unique identity partly as a function of the black community that continues to support it.

Chapter 7, “LIVENESS,” skips forward to another performance 20 years later at the University of Maryland in 2006. Here I demonstrated how go-go has managed to preserve and maintain the same cultural scripts as in 1986, including fashion, dance, recordings, and photography. These cultural scripts are played out live in the still vibrant contemporary go-go scene. Many of the dance, verbal, and fashion cues described in the 1986 recording have not changed. The heart of the go-go’s message generating/storytelling function continues to be the live show, which is the essence of the go-go experience and how it builds community in this alternate public sphere. This is how go-go tells the news. Go-go knits cultural narratives and happenings, controversies—news most meaningful to the audience. These are the narratives, information, and history produced by go-go.

## **A Counterdiscourse to Hip-Hop**

There was a point in time that black culture and youth cultures possessed regional quirks, textures and accents that reflected the places where the music was created. Thanks to the dynamic rise of hip-hop, that is now less frequently the case. Go-go took such a wildly different trajectory to the rise of hip-hop, that it could be seen as a counterdiscourse to this standardization of youth culture. Both art forms have roots in urban youth culture. And their origins are both a byproduct of the sociopolitical outlook facing urban centers at the collapse of the Industrial economy in the 1970s, which caused middle-class flight and required that new forms of urban public spheres emerge. This power vacuum led to the rise of underground economies that snatched their own cultural and economic power. In mid-1970s Bronx, New York, that was hip-hop. In mid-1970s Washington, D.C., this came in the form of go-go.

Hip-hop culture took a trajectory that is better known to most people. It rose above its New York origins, traveled around the world, and became a global youth movement distributed by multinational corporations. With the help of cable networks such as BET and MTV, hip-hop came to standardize black youth culture styles in slang, dress, and popular music throughout the United States and then all over the world. Three decades after black and Latino youth created it in the Bronx, the face of hip-hop remains dominated by black urban imagery. However, hip-hop is no longer a uniquely black public sphere, but a global commodity whose profits rarely go to the communities the music ostensibly reflects. Hip-hop no longer speaks to the needs or realities of young people in black urban communities who now represent just a

fraction of its consumers. While underground hip-hop continues to function as a black CNN, the majority of hip-hop that is consumed worldwide is a gross distortion of the reality of black life in America. Far from its block-by-block, hyperlocal origins, mainstream hip-hop is a platform which aggrandizes and exploits black pathology and dysfunction and then offers it up for the consumption of global audiences for corporate profit.

In its divergent path from hip-hop, go-go can be viewed as a kind of counter-discourse to this trajectory. Its parallel versus upward mobility allowed it to maintain its function as a uniquely black public sphere. Its fidelity to time-honored cultural scripts such as a live call & response as well as its locally rooted distribution and economic system is a statement about how a public sphere should be structured, culturally, aesthetically, and economically. Simply put: Go-go never sold out. Go-go, with its live heavily percussive instrumentation and discursive, nonlinear narrative forms, remains aesthetically faithful to a long history of uniquely black public spheres I described in Chapter 3, Call & Response. It lacks the polish and sheen of the high-tech production of contemporary hip-hop recordings or other kinds of popular music. There is a grit and texture to the music that accurately reflects, represents and speaks to the communities where it is created, consumed and profited from. The content of the recordings are aggressively zoned toward individuals and neighborhoods that are otherwise ignored by mainstream news media. Although the lyrical content is not devoid of “negativity,” the individuals both calling and responding to the messages reflect on black life in a way that is not distorted by multinational profit motive or the international gaze.

Go-go began as a discursive space in which to speak to the reality of life in Washington D.C. Go-go has guarded the function of this network by stubbornly refusing to cede its dominance to hip-hop. Go-go has remained the most visible manifestation of black youth culture, with styles in fashion, slang, and dance rooted in Washington, D.C. Much like a hyper-textual link, each go-go shout-out is as a footnote, referencing the people in the room and to the neighborhoods, blocks and communities where they reside. The socio-cultural context of the footnotes presents a flood of other unheard stories about Washington, D.C. As a discursive set of communication practices in particular, go-go offers greater validity and specificity than “mainstream” news reports.

Go-gos are also the place to learn about what Tuchman (1973) called “soft news” that reflects the texture of human life. They are the place to find out the latest cultural styles, products, services, and fashions available for purchase in the local black economic network. While go-go culture still maintains a local news function, it has also evolved into an industry that has capitalized on the links between consumption, identity, and economic power in creating a counterpublic discourse. Go-go culture as a whole guards an economic and cultural infrastructure that allows the same dollar to circle endlessly through Washington’s black community. Fliers advertising concerts are printed in local graphic shops. Clothing worn at go-gos are not bought at shopping malls, but designed by local artists, sewn in local factories, and sold in urban storefronts owned by black entrepreneurs. Black proprietors often own the properties where the go-gos take place. The security companies, bartenders, and bands themselves all live, work and play in the black community. The music



itself is pressed and distributed not in national chains or even iTunes, but in the network of black-owned mom & pop storefronts in the communities where go-go fans live. Three decades after it was created, live go-go performances and the satellite economy continue to serve as a “black CNN.” Go-go’s survival is a testament to the vitality of an autonomous economic network, the city-within-a-city that was not incinerated by the 1968 flames.

### ***Future Study***

Just as I am indebted to Lornell & Stephenson, who allowed an entry point for outsiders such as myself, I hope to open more doors for others who are interested in this vibrant culture. As I discussed in the methods chapter, my personal roles of journalist, ethnographer, and Washington resident have been blurred throughout this process. It is my belief that this point of view has allowed me to frame the questions around go-go that seek to provide greater understanding about this art form as well as the sociopolitical context in which it is located, although there is much more work to be done.

When I tell some people about the topic of my research, a frequent question asked is, “why is there so much violence around go-go?” I still don’t have any definitive answers. Some anecdotal explanations for the violence point to links between the nocturnal, sometimes illicit underground economy in Washington. Some players in the underground economy are also fans of go-go, and they bring their turf battles with them. These battles are further exacerbated by the competition to see whose crew or neighborhood will get shouted out on the mike. I have heard others

speculate that the violence at go-go shows is just a part of American culture, mirrored at local punk scene frequented by mostly white young fans. “Kids like to fight,” one deejay shrugged. In the Club U chapter, one police officer speculated that it is simply a matter of youth, immaturity and too much alcohol being a toxic combination. One go-go fan, an ex-convict in his late 20s, told me that fighting is also part of the spectacle in go-go, much like a boxing match.

Whatever the roots of it, the violence is a common theme throughout this study, from the R.I.P. t-shirts worn by fans, to the live tributes to young fans that are part of some live go-go performances, to the discourse over the future of the most high-profile venue, Club U. This violence is an unmistakable part of the history of District of Columbia. Go-go is an artform which another performance which celebrates the dead and allows them to live on through, another embodiment of what Roach (1996) called a living effigy, the go-go performance becomes a way for all those who lost their lives can live on. It is the ultimate expression of the continued dominance of the twins themes of freedom and death that run throughout black vernacular. The roots of this violence and the illicit part of the underground economy in which go-go operates would be fertile ground for sociologists or others. For the purposes of this study, the violence and even the underground drug economy are only relevant inasmuch as they help to tell the news that is going on in Washington.

Another area of future research would be the go-go economy. I relied on interviews with research partners and financial figures provided by a writer for the online magazine *Take Me Out To the Go-Go* to make conclusions about the scope of the economy supports go-go. But even the writer from the go-go magazine was forced

to use aliases and pen names in order to speak freely. Similarly, in his study of a specific underground economy in Chicago, Venkatesh (2006) was able to obtain detailed financial details about the underground community in Chicago. But he provided his informants with anonymity and changed specific details to protect them. I did not pursue getting economic information from the go-go scene for several reasons. Part of the ethical mandate in conducting research is to do no harm. Including detailed financial data in this study would necessarily put informants under scrutiny from the IRS and others. Because much of this research began in my role as a journalist, many of the characters are already on the official record. It would be impossible to take them off. Because of my unique positioning and history, and continuing affiliations with The Washington Post, I did not ask for, nor did I receive private financial data about the go-go industry. It is a unique community that is relatively small and geographically focused around Washington, D.C., thus it would be impossible to cloak most of the informants identities through anonymity. Future researchers who do not have this history may be able to go farther in filling in this part of the picture.

As I mentioned in the methods chapter, another area not addressed here that could be a fruitful area of inquiry is the role of women, sexuality, and their troubling intersections that exist within the go-go community. Why are there so few lead talkers who are women? Why is there so much sexually suggestive dancing? How do women in the industry negotiate their own gender space? All are fruitful areas of future study.

I also hope to pursue an archive of go-go recordings and artifacts. As I previously noted, go-go is all about preserving and celebrating each life—before it’s too late. It’s a loud affirmation that “I’m here!” from communities that are too often ignored. A shout-out during a live show provides a moment of glory and affirmation, but it is fleeting. A range of other kinds of rituals in the go-go tradition also appear to be designed to allow these affirmations last a bit longer, including Polaroid corner photographs, video recordings, photos heat-pressed onto T-shirts and “Rest in Peace” T-shirts. Preserving, cataloguing and archiving these artifacts would provide grist for future study. The R.I.P. T-shirt of Hot Rod that I described in the “Liveness” chapter is a good example of how this data may be used. At the time I was assigned by the Post to write about the 16-year-old, months after his death in 2004, Rodney “Hot Rod” Valentine’s murder had been unsolved and police could find no official record. However, a photograph of Hot Rod had been preserved in a shabby corner of Iverson Mall, in Prince George’s County, Md. The storeowner had hundreds of similar images of young people on his hard drive. These should all be copied and preserved and placed into an archive so that those lives are not similarly erased.

The rich trove of go-go recordings I tapped into for this study will not last forever. Cassette tapes have a finite shelf life before they degrade and cannot be heard. Archivists that Nico and I spoke to noted that even the recordings that have been converted onto CD have a finite shelf life. It is imperative that as many of these live recordings as possible are catalogued and preserved. Viewed as culture time capsules, these recordings are a rich source of historical data for cultural historians and those interested in urban life in Washington, D.C. A searchable archive of older

recordings could provide information about specific people, places, styles and times that are included on each recording. Much like Lexis-Nexis, older go-go recordings can be seen as a primary source that can be put into conversation with what is known about the city at that time. More recordings should be transcribed, to provide a searchable database of information. The data gleaned from the recordings include neighborhoods, names and nicknames, dances, fashion, styles. All would provide a more complete picture of the nation's capital and its residents.

### **An Evolving Sphere**

In attempting to shed some light about the divide between the go-go and “mainstream” media industries, my own role in this process has been more than just a disinterested observer. As a dedicated resident of the Chocolate City, which is in transition due to gentrification, I’m painfully aware of the remnants of the go-go infrastructure shrinking in the city where I live. I have witnessed the retreat of black-owned businesses in the city. Personally and professionally I find myself in the middle of a crossroads, in the future of the city, the future of go-go, and the future of the industries supporting journalism and music—all spheres that are in transition and in some ways under siege by market forces spinning beyond their control.

For the city, this transition is most evident in skyrocketing real estate values, which have for instance, quadrupled in my neighborhood. For go-go, it is threats posed by the violence that sometimes follows the music that are no longer tolerated, as was the case for Club U. For the journalism and music industries, the transition is reflected in a struggle to redefine their industries at a time when the Internet and other new media platforms are causing their central dominance and profits to plummet.

Infinite numbers of new channels continue open up on the Internet, to the shakeups in the print journalism and local television, the rise in satellite cable and radio, I-Pods and the de-massification of new media. All suggest a de-centering of media and cultural power.

My multiple roles have provided unique intersections and vantage points from which to view these changes going as they relate to go-go. At the time of this writing in 2007, the city's nightclub scene on U Street and H Street were well into the process of going upscale, further pushing out the live go-go scene and the attendant network of mom & pop stores. The Ibex, the former go-go club that hosted the Backyard Band concert the night that Officer Brian Gibson was killed by a patron in 1997, was transformed into luxury condos. The flagship store for the local urbanwear designer We R One on Florida Avenue, Northwest went out of business in the summer of 2007. A few steps away, the retail distributor Central Communications at the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Florida Avenue Northwest painted over the "Go-Go" part of its sign. The mall that held the flagship go-go distributor, P.A. Palace, was bulldozed months ago to make way for a Walmart.

What is most striking about go-go sphere's shift eastward and outside the city is the lack of sentimentality about the migration I heard from the community. TCB Tony's reaction to the Club U debate, "Who Fucking Cares," seemed to be shared by others. Go-go is by nature an itinerant sphere, thus life goes on. Go-go bands continue to play, seven days a week. New bands crop up every day. A storefront that may be booming at one point (as the store where Nico worked as a manager appeared to be) is not promised to do so tomorrow. Venues such as Club U open for business, make a

lot of money, and then close. For months and even years, local teenagers will pay exorbitant prices for a brand of T-shirt, and then it loses popularity. Just as go-go musicians are constantly trying new musical combinations, experimenting with reggae, neo-soul and hip-hop, go-go's architects embrace economic principles that demand constant evolution and updating. Kevin "Kato" Hammond was an early technology adopter, founding his online magazine Take Me Out to the Go-Go in 1996. In 2007, he started "Go-Go Radio" on the Internet.

This is the nature of this particular public sphere, constant evolution, as Donnell Floyd of Familiar Faces described it, finding the "right formula." Go-go continues to demonstrate how in the age of new and emerging media, the very essence of go-go "liveness" means motion, innovation, and aggressively playing to the needs of local fans. Go-go's future (and interestingly, the future of local journalism) hinges on its ability to continue to be a cultural steward for its primary constituency. If so, go-go will continue to be a history that is remade and forgotten each day, giving a voice to future generations of Washington-area residents.

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<sup>1</sup> The informal nature of go-go makes it virtually impossible to quantify exactly how often they occur in the Washington Metropolitan area. Botch, a 21-year-old go-go fan and band member (Personal communication, 2005) estimated that an average of six to seven go-gos take place each weeknight and as many as 16 different performances on Friday and Saturday nights. Go-go Nico, a research partner discussed at length in Chapter 5, estimates that at the height of go-go's popularity in the mid 1980s, there were 5-7 different shows on each weekday and 10-15 on each weekend night. In 2007, Nico estimated there were 3-5 go-gos operating in various venues during weekdays, and 10 different shows on Friday and Saturday nights (Personal communication, 2007). Go-go bands are also frequently hired to perform at private events at private schools and public schools, often sponsored by black student groups. Top go-go bands perform 5 to 6 days per week—all in the Washington, D.C. area.

<sup>2</sup> The go-go industry is almost entirely black-owned and operated and employs hundreds of people in the Washington area. Aside from the top nightclubs required to report their substantial tax revenue, most of the industry is comprised of small, independent companies that don't necessarily report their income to IRS. As Foxx (2002) notes, the "off the books" nature of go-go is compounded by the fact that the majority of go-go CD's and tapes are purchased via the "Live P.A. underground," or mom & pop storefronts that sell live go-go recordings or P.A.s (also discussed in Chapter 5.) Foxx notes that "in other music genres this would be termed bootlegging, but in go-go it is an accepted fact of life that is embraced by both bands and fans alike" (Foxx, 2002).

One notable exception to the black-owned and "off the books" rule in the go-go industry is the distribution company Liaison Records, Inc. This is a Maryland-based independent distribution company is the primary "mainstream" channel for go-go recordings, holding back catalogue of recordings from virtually all the major go-go bands ([www.liaisonrecords.com/gogo.html](http://www.liaisonrecords.com/gogo.html)). Foxx estimates that Liaison Records distributed more than 100,000 units of new go-go recordings by three groups, Chuck Brown, Rare Essence and 911, in 2001 alone (Foxx, 2002). Other major moneymakers are sound companies, P.A. distributors, clothing companies, bouncers, and promoters. All of this adds up to a multimillion-dollar industry (Foxx, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> This action by the majority-black power structure in Prince George's County, Maryland reflected the economic fragmentation among Washington area's black community. Several of the clubs were eventually reopened following a court ruling upholding the individual property rights of club owners. The economic argument against the closing of go-go venues was preceded and mirrored by the 2005 public discourse over the closing of another high-profile go-go in Washington, D.C., which is discussed in Chapter 4, "Club U." This class warfare due to economic fragmentation of the black community was also explored in a previous study of Washington's ethnic media (Hopkinson, 2006b).

<sup>4</sup> The Black Public Sphere Collective was the fruit of a collaboration of two conferences, "Toward an Ethnography of the Institutions of the Black Community," organized by the Africana Studies Program of New York University in Spring 1993 and "The Black Public Sphere in the Reagan Bush Era," from a 1994 conference by the Chicago Humanities Institute of the University of Chicago. The book form of the collaboration drew from the fields of anthropology, history, political science, sociology, film, music and publishing to bear on the topic of the Black Public Sphere. The Black Culture Book first appeared in the Fall 1994 as a special issue of the journal *Public Culture*. The University of Chicago Press published it in 1995 as a book with editorship credited to the Black Public Sphere Collective (Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995, p.1-3).

<sup>5</sup> However, even under Home Rule, the governance structure of the District of Columbia essentially retains a colonial structure: Congress reviews all legislation passed by the city council before it can become law and retains final authority over the city's budget. As of December 2007, District residents still lacked voting representation in the House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate.

<sup>6</sup> I was an undergraduate at Howard University, a historically black institution, from 1994-1998. At the time, major go-go clubs such as the Ibex and Black Hole (Celebrity Hall) were located in walking distance, on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington, D.C. Although I was into live hip-hop and



jazz, I don't recall going to go-gos or it ever coming up as an option among friends or associates. My husband Rudy McGann also attended Howard and recalls being told never to attend go-gos because college students were targets for robbery and violence. He did hear that go-gos *once* took place in the Blackburn Center, the student union, but we never heard about them when we were there. Anderson (2001) notes similar divisions among 1920s and 1930s black intellectuals around black folk idioms such as the blues. The preeminent Harlem Renaissance architect and Howard University professor Alain Locke eschewed jazz, the blues and other black folk idioms in favor of European-influenced, "cosmopolitan" black expressive styles. A younger generation of intellectuals such as Zora Neale Hurston (a Howard University graduate) and Langston Hughes, (who spent time in Washington D.C. as a young busboy on 7<sup>th</sup> Street NW), embraced the blues and other folk idioms wholeheartedly.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the tensions between the *Washington Post* and Washington's black community, see *Volunteer Slavery*, a 1994 memoir by former *Post* writer Jill Nelson. The book covers Nelson's tenure at the *Post* from 1986 through the coverage of the 1990 drug charges trial of former D.C. Mayor Marion Barry. In it, Nelson shows how newsroom politics and institutional forces conspire to provide a skewed picture of the black community, which led to a boycott and 13 weeks of protests by black readers, most notably political scientist Ron Walters, and Rev. Walter Fauntroy, outside the *Post* building in 1986. I also discussed these tensions in a previous conference paper, "Black Representation in Washington's Drug Scare of 1986" (Hopkinson, 2006b). For a fuller discussion of the tensions of black reporters in major media organizations in general, see *Black Journalists in Paradox* by Clint C. Wilson II (1991) who taught me journalism at Howard University.

<sup>8</sup> A Nexis-Lexis review of coverage since the mid-1970s shows that go-go has never been integrated into arts coverage in Washington's print media with any correlation to the number of shows going on a daily basis. (However, staff writers Richard Harrington, Alona Wartofsky, and Eric Brace have written textured criticism of the scene from time to time.) The other major daily newspaper, the *Washington Times* has sporadic at best arts criticism of the scene. There is no public access to digital archives of the local black press, however anecdotal data suggests limited coverage of go-go. In a previous study I reviewed all the issues of *Washington Afro-American* in 1986, and found no coverage of go-go aside from a photo and caption of Chuck Brown (Hopkinson, 2006b).

<sup>9</sup> The following is a partial list of go-go venues I've visited since 1999 when I became an arts writer at the *Post* to give an idea of the scope of the field in which this dissertation was researched: Takoma Station, Tradewinds, The Ibex, The Complex, 2:K:9, Classics, The Hot Shoppes/The Hot Shop Café, Legends, Phish Tea Café, Between Friends, the Anacostia Museum, the Mall for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Mirrors, Zanzibar, Cranberries, The Icon, the Daughters of the American Revolution's Constitution Hall, block party in the unit block of S Street NW, Dinosaurs, Republic Gardens, Cada Vez, Baileys, the United States Postal Museum, University of Maryland-College Park Stamp Student Union, Club U, Wilmer's Park.

Among the bands I've been to see are: Familiar Faces, Lissen Band, Junkyard Band, EU, Maisha and the Hip-Huggers, Fatal Attraction Band, Chuck Brown, Critical Condition Band, Backyard Band, INI Band, Uncalled For Band (UCB), SOS Band and Suttle.

I have also visited and/or interviewed the owners of most of the major local urban wear fashion lines, including H.O.B.O, SHOOTERS Sports, WE R ONE, ALL DAZ, Aja Imani, Vusi Mchunu, Madness Connection. I've also spent some time at P.A. Palace and I-Hip-Hop and Go-Go, and Central Communications, where go-go P.A.s are sold.

<sup>10</sup> I am not naming the designer here to avoid adding further insult to injury. However, a citation to the article that was eventually published can be found in References under Hopkinson and Williams (2003).